MISS BILLY'S DECISION

ELEANOR H. PORTER

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To Vera
From grandma

A Merry Xmas

MISS BILLY'S DECISION

BY THE AUTHOR

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MISS BILLY'S DECISION

BY

ELEANOR H. PORTER

AUTHOR OF

POLLYANNA, ETC,

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TO

My Cousin Helen

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Miss Billy's Decision

CHAPTER I

CALDERWELL DOES SOME TALKING

CALDERWELL had met Mr. M. J. Arkwright in London through a common friend; since then they had tramped half over Europe together in a comradeship that was as delightful as it was unusual. As Calderwell put it in a letter to his sister, Belle:

"We smoke the same cigar and drink the same tea (he's just as much of an old woman on that subject as I am!), and we agree beautifully on all necessary points of living, from tipping to late sleeping in the morning; while as for politics and religion — we disagree in those just enough to lend spice to an otherwise tame existence."

Farther along in this same letter Calderwell touched upon his new friend again.

"I admit, however, I would like to know his name. To find out what that mysterious 'M. J.' stands for has got to be pretty nearly an obsession with me. I am about ready to pick his pocket or rifle his trunk in search of some lurking 'Martin' or 'John' that will set me at peace. As it is, I confess that I have ogled his incoming mail and his outgoing baggage shamelessly, only to be slapped in the face always and everlastingly by that bland 'M. J.' I've got my revenge, now, though. To myself I call him 'Mary Jane' — and his broad-shouldered, brown-bearded six feet of muscular manhood would so like to be called 'Mary Jane'! By the way, Belle, if you ever hear of murder and sudden death in my direction, better set the sleuths on the trail of Arkwright. Six to one you'll find I called him 'Mary Jane' to his face!"

Calderwell was thinking of that letter now, as he sat at a small table in a Paris café. Opposite him was the six feet of muscular manhood, broad shoulders, pointed brown beard, and all — and he had just addressed it, inadvertently, as "Mary Jane."

During the brief, sickening moment of silence after the name had left his lips, Calderwell was conscious of a whimsical realization of the lights, music, and laughter all about him.

"Well, I chose as safe a place as I could!" he was thinking. Then Arkwright spoke.

"How long since you've been in correspondence with members of my family?"

"Eh?"

Arkwright laughed grimly.

"Perhaps you thought of it yourself, then — I'll admit you're capable of it," he nodded, reaching for a cigar. "But it so happens you hit upon my family's favorite name for me."

"*Mary Jane!* You mean they actually *call* you that?"

"Yes," bowed the big fellow, calmly, as he struck a light. "Appropriate! — don't you think?"

Calderwell did not answer. He thought he could not.

"Well, silence gives consent, they say," laughed the other. "Anyhow, you must have had *some* reason for calling me that."

"Arkwright, what *does* 'M. J.' stand for?" demanded Calderwell.

"Oh, is that it?" smiled the man opposite. "Well, I'll own those initials have been something of a puzzle to people. One man declares they're 'Merely Jokes'; but another, not so friendly, says they stand for 'Mostly Jealousy' of more fortunate chaps who have real names for a handle. My

small brothers and sisters, discovering, with the usual perspicacity of one's family on such matters, that I never signed, or called myself anything but 'M. J.,' dubbed me 'Mary Jane.' And there you have it."

"Mary Jane! You!"

Arkwright smiled oddly.

"Oh, well, what's the difference? Would you deprive them of their innocent amusement? And they do so love that 'Mary Jane'! Besides, what's in a name, anyway?" he went on, eyeing the glowing tip of the cigar between his fingers. "'A rose by any other name — ' — you've heard that, probably. Names don't always signify, my dear fellow. For instance, I know a 'Billy' — but he's a girl."

Calderwell gave a sudden start.

"You don't mean Billy — Neilson?"

The other turned sharply.

"Do *you* know Billy Neilson?"

Calderwell gave his friend a glance from scornful eyes.

"Do I know Billy Neilson?" he cried. "Does a fellow usually know the girl he's proposed to regularly once in three months? Oh, I know I'm telling tales out of school, of course," he went on, in response to the look that had come into the brown eyes opposite. "But what's the use?

Everybody knows it — that knows us. Billy herself got so she took it as a matter of course — and refused as a matter of course, too; just as she would refuse a serving of apple pie at dinner, if she hadn't wanted it."

"Apple pie!" scouted Arkwright.

Calderwell shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear fellow, you don't seem to realize it, but for the last six months you have been assisting at the obsequies of a dead romance."

"Indeed! And is it — buried, yet?"

"Oh, no," sighed Calderwell, cheerfully. "I shall go back one of these days, I'll warrant, and begin the same old game again; though I will acknowledge that the last refusal was so very decided that it's been a year, almost, since I received it. I think I was really convinced, for a while, that — that she didn't want that apple pie," he finished with a whimsical lightness that did not quite coincide with the stern lines that had come to his mouth.

For a moment there was silence, then Calderwell spoke again.

"Where did you know — Miss Billy?"

"Oh, I don't know her at all. I know of her — through Aunt Hannah."

Calderwell sat suddenly erect.

"Aunt Hannah! Is she your aunt, too?

Jove! This *is* a little old world, after all; isn't it?"

"She isn't my aunt. She's my mother's third cousin. None of us have seen her for years, but she writes to mother occasionally; and, of course, for some time now, her letters have been running over full of Billy. She lives with her, I believe; doesn't she?"

"She does," rejoined Calderwell, with an unexpected chuckle. "I wonder if you know how she happened to live with her, at first."

"Why, no, I reckon not. What do you mean?"

Calderwell chuckled again.

"Well, I'll tell you. You, being a 'Mary Jane,' ought to appreciate it. You see, Billy was named for one William Henshaw, her father's chum, who promptly forgot all about her. At eighteen, Billy, being left quite alone in the world, wrote to 'Uncle William' and asked to come and live with him."

"Well?"

"But it wasn't well. William was a forty-year-old widower who lived with two younger brothers, an old butler, and a Chinese cook in one of those funny old Beacon Street houses in Boston. 'The Strata,' Bertram called it. Bright boy — Bertram!"

"The Strata!"

"Yes. I wish you could see that house, Arkwright. It's a regular layer cake. Cyril — he's the second brother; must be thirty-four or five now — lives on the top floor in a rugless, curtainless, music-mad existence — just a plain crank. Below him comes William. William collects things — everything from tenpenny nails to teapots, I should say, and they're all there in his rooms. Farther down somewhere comes Bertram. He's *the* Bertram Henshaw, you understand; the artist."

"Not the 'Face-of-a-Girl' Henshaw?"

"The same; only of course four years ago he wasn't quite so well known as he is now. Well, to resume and go on. It was into this house, this masculine paradise ruled over by Pete and Dong Ling in the kitchen, that Billy's naïve request for a home came."

"Great Scott!" breathed Arkwright, appreciatively.

"Yes. Well, the letter was signed 'Billy.' They took her for a boy, naturally, and after something of a struggle they agreed to let 'him' come. For his particular delectation they fixed up a room next to Bertram with guns and fishing rods, and such ladylike specialties; and William went to the station to meet the boy."

"With never a suspicion?"

"With never a suspicion."

"Gorry!"

"Well, 'he' came, and 'she' conquered. I guess things were lively for a while, though. Oh, there was a kitten, too, I believe, 'Spunk,' who added to the gayety of nations."

"But what did the Henshaws do?"

"Well, I wasn't there, of course; but Bertram says they spun around like tops gone mad for a time, but finally quieted down enough to summon a married sister for immediate propriety, and to establish Aunt Hannah for permanency the next day."

"So that's how it happened! Well, by George!" cried Arkwright.

"Yes," nodded the other. "So you see there are untold possibilities just in a name. Remember that. Just suppose *you*, as Mary Jane, should beg a home in a feminine household — say in Miss Billy's, for instance!"

"I'd like to," retorted Arkwright, with sudden warmth.

Calderwell stared a little.

The other laughed shamefacedly.

"Oh, it's only that I happen to have a devouring curiosity to meet that special young lady. I sing her songs (you know she's written some dandies!), I've heard a lot about her, and I've

seen her picture." (He did not add that he had also purloined that same picture from his mother's bureau — the picture being a gift from Aunt Hannah.) "So you see I would, indeed, like to occupy a corner in the fair Miss Billy's household. I could write to Aunt Hannah and beg a home with her, you know; eh?"

"Of course! Why don't you — 'Mary Jane'?" laughed Calderwell. "Billy'd take you all right. She's had a little Miss Hawthorn, a music teacher, there for months. She's always doing stunts of that sort. Belle writes me that she's had a dozen forlornites there all this last summer, two or three at a time — tired widows, lonesome old maids, and crippled kids — just to give them a royal good time. So you see she'd take you, without a doubt. Jove! what a pair you'd make: Miss Billy and Mr. Mary Jane! You'd drive the suffragettes into conniption fits — just by the sound of you!"

Arkwright laughed quietly; then he frowned.

"But how about it?" he asked. "I thought she was keeping house with Aunt Hannah. Didn't she stay at all with the Henshaws?"

"Oh, yes, a few months. I never knew just why she did leave, but I fancied, from something Billy herself said once, that she discovered she was creating rather too much of an upheaval in

the Strata. So she took herself off. She went to school, and travelled considerably. She was over here when I met her first. After that she was with us all one summer on the yacht. A couple of years ago, or so, she went back to Boston, bought a house and settled down with Aunt Hannah."

"And she's not married — or even engaged?"

"Wasn't the last I heard. I haven't seen her since December, and I've heard from her only indirectly. She corresponds with my sister, and so do I — intermittently. I heard a month ago from Belle, and *she* had a letter from Billy in August. But I heard nothing of any engagement."

"How about the Henshaws? I should think there might be a chance there for a romance — a charming girl, and three unattached men."

Calderwell gave a slow shake of the head.

"I don't think so. William is — let me see — nearly forty-five, I guess, by this time; and he isn't a marrying man. He buried his heart with his wife and baby years ago. Cyril, according to Bertram, 'hates women and all other confusion,' so that ought to let him out. As for Bertram himself — Bertram is 'only Bertram.' He's always been that. Bertram loves girls — to paint; but I can't imagine him making serious love to any one. It would always be the tilt of a chin or the

turn of a cheek that he was admiring — to paint. No, there's no chance for a romance there, I'll warrant."

"But there's — yourself."

Calderwell's eyebrows rose the fraction of an inch.

"Oh, of course. I presume January or February will find me back there," he admitted with a sigh and a shrug. Then, a little bitterly, he added: "No, Arkwright. I shall keep away if I can. I *know* there's no chance for me — now."

"Then you'll leave me a clear field?" bantered the other.

"Of course — 'Mary Jane,'" retorted Calderwell, with equal lightness.

"Thank you."

"Oh, you needn't," laughed Calderwell. "My giving you the right of way doesn't insure you a thoroughfare for yourself — there are others, you know. Billy Neilson has had sighing swains about her, I imagine, since she could walk and talk. She is a wonderfully fascinating little bit of femininity, and she has a heart of pure gold. All is, I envy the man who wins it — for the man who wins that, wins her."

There was no answer. Arkwright sat with his eyes on the moving throng outside the window near them. Perhaps he had not heard. At all

events, when he spoke some time later, it was of a matter far removed from Miss Billy Neilson, or the way to her heart. Nor was the young lady mentioned between them again that day.

Long hours later, just before parting for the night, Arkwright said:

"Calderwell, I'm sorry, but I believe, after all, I can't take that trip to the lakes with you. I — I'm going home next week."

"Home! Hang it, Arkwright! I'd counted on you. Isn't this rather sudden?"

"Yes, and no. I'll own I've been drifting about with you contentedly enough for the last six months to make you think mountain-climbing and boat-paddling were the end and aim of my existence. But they aren't, you know, really."

"Nonsense! At heart you're as much of a vagabond as I am; and you know it."

"Perhaps. But unfortunately I don't happen to carry your pocketbook."

"You may, if you like. I'll hand it over any time," grinned Calderwell.

"Thanks. You know well enough what I mean," shrugged the other.

There was a moment's silence; then Calderwell queried:

"Arkwright, how old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"Good! Then you're merely travelling to supplement your education, see?"

"Oh, yes, I see. But something besides my education has got to be supplemented now, I reckon."

"What are you going to do?"

There was an almost imperceptible hesitation; then, a little shortly, came the answer:

"Hit the trail for Grand Opera, and bring up, probably — in vaudeville."

Calderwell smiled appreciatively.

"You *can* sing like the devil," he admitted.

"Thanks," returned his friend, with uplifted eyebrows. "Do you mind calling it 'an angel' — just for this occasion?"

"Oh, the matinée-girls will do that fast enough. But, I say, Arkwright, what are you going to do with those initials then?"

"Let 'em alone."

"Oh, no, you won't. And you won't be 'Mary Jane,' either. Imagine a Mary Jane in Grand Opera! I know what you'll be. You'll be 'Señor Martini Johnini Arkwrightino'! By the way, you didn't say what that 'M. J.' really did stand for," hinted Calderwell, shamelessly

"'Merely Jokes' — in your estimation, evidently," shrugged the other. "But my going isn't a joke, Calderwell. I'm really going. And I'm going to work."

"But — how shall you manage?"

"Time will tell."

Calderwell frowned and stirred restlessly in his chair.

"But, honestly, now, to — to follow that trail of yours will take money. And — er —" a faint red stole to his forehead — "don't they have — er — patrons for these young and budding geniuses? Why can't I have a hand in this trail, too — or maybe you'd call it a foot, eh? I'd be no end glad to, Arkwright."

"Thanks, old man." The red was duplicated this time above the brown silky beard. "That was mighty kind of you, and I appreciate it; but it won't be necessary. A generous, but perhaps misguided bachelor uncle left me a few thousands a year or so ago; and I'm going to put them all down my throat — or rather, *into* it — before I give up."

"Where you going to study? New York?"

Again there was an almost imperceptible hesitation before the answer came.

"I'm not quite prepared to say."

"Why not try it here?"

Arkwright shook his head.

"I did plan to, when I came over; but I've changed my mind. I believe I'd rather work a while longer in America."

"Hm-m," murmured Calderwell.

There was a brief silence, followed by other questions and other answers; after which the friends said good night.

In his own room, as he was dropping off to sleep, Calderwell muttered drowsily:

"By George! I haven't found out yet what that blamed 'M. J.' stands for!"

CHAPTER II

AUNT HANNAH GETS A LETTER

In the cozy living-room at Hillside, Billy Neilson's pretty home on Corey Hill, Billy herself sat writing at the desk. Her pen had just traced the date, "October twenty-fifth," when Mrs. Stetson entered with a letter in her hand.

"Writing, my dear? Then don't let me disturb you." She turned as if to go.

Billy dropped her pen, sprang to her feet, flew to the little woman's side and whirled her half across the room.

"There!" she exclaimed, as she plumped the breathless and scandalized Aunt Hannah into the biggest easy chair. "I feel better. I just had to let off steam some way. It's so lovely you came in just when you did!"

"Indeed! I — I'm not so sure of that," stammered the lady, dropping the letter into her lap, and patting with agitated fingers her cap, her curls, the two shawls about her shoulders, and the lace at her throat. "My grief and conscience, Billy! Won't you *ever* grow up?"

"Hope not," purred Billy cheerfully, dropping herself on to a low hassock at Aunt Hannah's feet.

"But, my dear, you — you're engaged!"

Billy bubbled into a chuckling laugh.

"As if I didn't know that, when I've just written a dozen notes to announce it! And, oh, Aunt Hannah, such a time as I've had, telling what a dear Bertram is, and how I love, love, *love* him, and what beautiful eyes he has, and *such* a nose, and — "

"Billy!" Aunt Hannah was sitting erect in pale horror.

"Eh?" Billy's eyes were roguish.

"You didn't write that in those notes!"

"Write it? Oh, no! That's only what I *wanted* to write," chuckled Billy. "What I really did write was as staid and proper as — here, let me show you," she broke off, springing to her feet and running over to her desk. "There! this is about what I wrote to them all," she finished, whipping a note out of one of the unsealed envelopes on the desk and spreading it open before Aunt Hannah's suspicious eyes.

"Hm-m; that is very good — for you," admitted the lady.

"Well, I like that! — after all my stern self-control and self-sacrifice to keep out all those things I *wanted* to write," bridled Billy. "Be-

sides, they'd have been ever so much more interesting reading than these will be," she pouted, as she took the note from her companion's hand.

"I don't doubt it," observed Aunt Hannah, dryly.

Billy laughed, and tossed the note back on the desk.

"I'm writing to Belle Calderwell, now," she announced musingly, dropping herself again on the hassock. "I suppose she'll tell Hugh."

"Poor boy! He'll be disappointed."

Billy sighed, but she uptilted her chin a little.

"He ought not to be. I told him long, long ago, the very first time, that — that I couldn't."

"I know, dear; but — they don't always understand." Aunt Hannah sighed in sympathy with the far-away Hugh Calderwell, as she looked down at the bright young face near her.

There was a moment's silence; then Billy gave a little laugh.

"He *will* be surprised," she said. "He told me once that Bertram wouldn't ever care for any girl except to paint. To paint, indeed! As if Bertram didn't love me — just *me!* — if he never saw another tube of paint!"

"I think he does, my dear."

Again there was silence; then, from Billy's lips there came softly:

"Just think; we've been engaged almost four weeks — and to-morrow it'll be announced. I'm so glad I didn't ever announce the other two!"

"The other *two!*" cried Aunt Hannah.

Billy laughed.

"Oh, I forgot. You didn't know about Cyril."

"Cyril!"

"Oh, there didn't anybody know it, either — not even Cyril himself," dimpled Billy, mischievously. "I just engaged myself to him in imagination, you know, to see how I'd like it. I didn't like it. But it didn't last, anyhow, very long — just three weeks, I believe. Then I broke it off," she finished, with unsmiling mouth, but dancing eyes.

"Billy!" protested Aunt Hannah, feebly.

"But I *am* glad only the family knew about my engagement to Uncle William — oh, Aunt Hannah, you don't know how good it does seem to call him 'Uncle' again. It was always slipping out, anyhow, all the time we were engaged; and of course it was awful then."

"That only goes to prove, my dear, how entirely unsuitable it was, from the start."

A bright color flooded Billy's face.

"I know; but if a girl *will* think a man is asking for a wife when all he wants is a daughter, and if

she blandly says 'Yes, thank you, I'll marry you,' I don't know what you can expect!"

"You can expect just what you got — misery, and almost a tragedy," retorted Aunt Hannah, severely.

A tender light came into Billy's eyes.

"Dear Uncle William! What a jewel he was, all the way through! And he'd have marched straight to the altar, too, with never a flicker of an eyelid, I know — self-sacrificing martyr that he was!"

"Martyr!" bristled Aunt Hannah, with extraordinary violence for her. "I'm thinking that term belonged somewhere else. A month ago, Billy Neilson, you did not look as if you'd live out half your days. But I suppose *you'd* have gone to the altar, too, with never a flicker of an eyelid!"

"But I thought I had to," protested Billy. "I couldn't grieve Uncle William so, after Mrs. Hartwell had said how he — he wanted me."

Aunt Hannah's lips grew stern at the corners.

"There are times when — when I think it would be wiser if Mrs. Kate Hartwell would attend to her own affairs!" Aunt Hannah's voice fairly shook with wrath.

"Why — Aunt Hannah!" reproved Billy in mischievous horror. "I'm shocked at you!"

Aunt Hannah flushed miserably.

"There, there, child, forget I said it. I ought not to have said it, of course," she murmured agitatedly.

Billy laughed.

"You should have heard what Uncle William said! But never mind. We all found out the mistake before it was too late, and everything is lovely now, even to Cyril and Marie. Did you ever see anything so beatifically happy as that couple are? Bertram says he hasn't heard a dirge from Cyril's rooms for three weeks; and that if anybody else played the kind of music he's been playing, it would be just common garden ragtime!"

"Music! Oh, my grief and conscience! That makes me think, Billy. If I'm not actually forgetting what I came in here for," cried Aunt Hannah, fumbling in the folds of her dress for the letter that had slipped from her lap. "I've had word from a young niece. She's going to study music in Boston."

"A niece?"

"Well, not really, you know. She calls me 'Aunt,' just as you and the Henshaw boys do. But I really am related to *her*, for her mother and I are third cousins, while it was my husband who was distantly related to the Henshaw family."

"What's her name?"

"'Mary Jane Arkwright.' Where is that letter?"

"Here it is, on the floor," reported Billy. "Were you going to read it to me?" she asked, as she picked it up.

"Yes — if you don't mind."

"I'd love to hear it."

"Then I'll read it. It — it rather annoys me in some ways. I thought the whole family understood that I wasn't living by myself any longer — that I was living with you. I'm sure I thought I wrote them that, long ago. But this sounds almost as if they didn't understand it — at least, as if this girl didn't."

"How old is she?"

"I don't know; but she must be some old, to be coming here to Boston to study music, alone — singing, I think she said."

"You don't remember her, then?"

Aunt Hannah frowned and paused, the letter half withdrawn from its envelope.

"No — but that isn't strange. They live West. I haven't seen any of them for years. I know there are several children — and I suppose I've been told their names. I know there's a boy — the eldest, I think — who is quite a singer, and there's a girl who paints, I believe; but I don't seem to remember a 'Mary Jane.'"

"Never mind! Suppose we let Mary Jane speak for herself," suggested Billy, dropping her chin into the small pink cup of her hand, and settling herself to listen.

"Very well," sighed Aunt Hannah; and she opened the letter and began to read.

"DEAR AUNT HANNAH: — This is to tell you that I'm coming to Boston to study singing in the school for Grand Opera, and I'm planning to look you up. Do you object? I said to a friend the other day that I'd half a mind to write to Aunt Hannah and beg a home with her; and my friend retorted: 'Why don't you, Mary Jane?' But that, of course, I should not think of doing.

"But I know I shall be lonesome, Aunt Hannah, and I hope you'll let me see you once in a while, anyway. I plan now to come next week — I've already got as far as New York, as you see by the address — and I shall hope to see you soon.

"All the family would send love, I know.

"M. J. ARKWRIGHT."

"Grand Opera! Oh, how perfectly lovely," cried Billy.

"Yes, but Billy, do you think she is expecting me to invite her to make her home with me? I

shall have to write and explain that I can't — if she does, of course."

Billy frowned and hesitated.

"Why, it sounded — a little — that way; but — " Suddenly her face cleared. "Aunt Hannah, I've thought of the very thing. We *will* take her!"

"Oh, Billy, I couldn't think of letting you do that," demurred Aunt Hannah. "You're very kind — but, oh, no; not that!"

"Why not? I think it would be lovely; and we can just as well as not. After Marie is married in December, she can have that room. Until then she can have the little blue room next to me."

"But — but — we don't know anything about her."

"We know she's your niece, and she's lonesome; and we know she's musical. I shall love her for every one of those things. Of course we'll take her!"

"But — I don't know anything about her age."

"All the more reason why she should be looked out for, then," retorted Billy, promptly. "Why, Aunt Hannah, just as if you didn't want to give this lonesome, unprotected young girl a home!"

"Oh, I do, of course; but — "

"Then it's all settled," interposed Billy, springing to her feet.

"But what if we — we shouldn't like her?"

"Nonsense! What if she shouldn't like us?" laughed Billy. "However, if you'd feel better, just ask her to come and stay with us a month. We shall keep her all right, afterwards. See if we don't!"

Slowly Aunt Hannah got to her feet.

"Very well, dear. I'll write, of course, as you tell me to; and it's lovely of you to do it. Now I'll leave you to your letters. I've hindered you far too long, as it is."

"You've rested me," declared Billy, flinging wide her arms.

Aunt Hannah, fearing a second dizzying whirl impelled by those same young arms, drew her shawls about her shoulders and backed hastily toward the hall door.

Billy laughed.

"Oh, I won't again — to-day," she promised merrily. Then, as the lady reached the arched doorway: "Tell Mary Jane to let us know the day and train and we'll meet her. Oh, and Aunt Hannah, tell her to wear a pink — a white pink; and tell her we will, too," she finished gayly.

CHAPTER III

BILLY AND BERTRAM

BERTRAM called that evening. Before the open fire in the living-room he found a pensive Billy awaiting him — a Billy who let herself be kissed, it is true, and who even kissed back, shyly, adorably; but a Billy who looked at him with wide, almost frightened eyes.

"Why, darling, what's the matter?" he demanded, his own eyes growing wide and frightened.

"Bertram, it's — done!"

"What's done? What do you mean?"

"Our engagement. It's — announced. I wrote stacks of notes to-day, and even now there are some left for to-morrow. And then there's — the newspapers. Bertram, right away, now, *everybody* will know it." Her voice was tragic.

Bertram relaxed visibly. A tender light came to his eyes.

"Well, didn't you expect everybody would know it, my dear?"

"Y-yes; but — "

At her hesitation, the tender light changed to a quick fear.

"Billy, you aren't — sorry?"

The pink glory that suffused her face answered him before her words did.

"Sorry! Oh, never, Bertram! It's only that it won't be ours any longer — that is, it won't belong to just our two selves. Everybody will know it. And they'll bow and smile and say 'How lovely!' to our faces, and 'Did you ever?' to our backs. Oh, no, I'm not sorry, Bertram; but I am — afraid."

"*Afraid* — Billy!"

"Yes."

Billy sighed, and gazed with pensive eyes into the fire.

Across Bertram's face swept surprise, consternation, and dismay. Bertram had thought he knew Billy in all her moods and fancies; but he did not know her in this one.

"Why, Billy!" he breathed.

Billy drew another sigh. It seemed to come from the very bottoms of her small, satin-slippered feet.

"Well, I am. You're *the* Bertram Henshaw. You know lots and lots of people that I never even saw. And they'll come and stand around

and stare and lift their lorgnettes and say: 'Is that the one? Dear me!' "

Bertram gave a relieved laugh.

"Nonsense, sweetheart! I should think you were a picture I'd painted and hung on a wall."

"I shall feel as if I were — with all those friends of yours. Bertram, what if they don't like it?" Her voice had grown tragic again.

"*Like* it!"

"Yes. The picture — me, I mean."

"They can't help liking it," he retorted, with the prompt certainty of an adoring lover.

Billy shook her head. Her eyes had gone back to the fire.

"Oh, yes, they can. I can hear them. 'What, *she* — Bertram Henshaw's wife? — a frivolous, inconsequential "Billy" like that?' Bertram!" — Billy turned fiercely despairing eyes on her lover — "Bertram, sometimes I wish my name were 'Clarissa Cordelia,' or 'Arabella Maud,' or 'Hannah Jane' — anything that's feminine and proper!"

Bertram's ringing laugh brought a faint smile to Billy's lips. But the words that followed the laugh, and the caressing touch of the man's hands sent a flood of shy color to her face.

"'Hannah Jane,' indeed! As if I'd exchange

my Billy for her or any Clarissa or Arabella that ever grew! I adore Billy — name, nature, and — "

"And naughtiness?" put in Billy herself.

"Yes — if there be any," laughed Bertram, fondly. "But, see," he added, taking a tiny box from his pocket, "see what I've brought for this same Billy to wear. She'd have had it long ago if she hadn't insisted on waiting for this announcement business."

"Oh, Bertram, what a beauty!" dimpled Billy, as the flawless diamond in Bertram's fingers caught the light and sent it back in a flash of flame and crimson.

"Now you are mine — really mine, sweetheart!" The man's voice and hand shook as he slipped the ring on Billy's outstretched finger.

Billy caught her breath with almost a sob.

"And I'm so glad to be — yours, dear," she murmured brokenly. "And — and I'll make you proud that I am yours, even if I am just 'Billy,'" she choked. "Oh, I know I'll write such beautiful, beautiful songs now."

The man drew her into a close embrace.

"As if I cared for that," he scoffed lovingly.

Billy looked up in quick horror.

"Why, Bertram, you don't mean you don't — care?"

He laughed lightly, and took the dismayed little face between his two hands.

"Care, darling? of course I care! You know how I love your music. I care about everything that concerns you. I meant that I'm proud of you *now* — just you. I love *you*, you know."

There was a moment's pause. Billy's eyes, as they looked at him, carried a curious intentness in their dark depths.

"You mean, you like — the turn of my head and the tilt of my chin?" she asked a little breathlessly.

"I adore them!" came the prompt answer.

To Bertram's utter amazement, Billy drew back with a sharp cry.

"No, no — not that!"

"Why, *Billy!*"

Billy laughed unexpectedly; then she sighed.

"Oh, it's all right, of course," she assured him hastily. "It's only —" Billy stopped and blushed. Billy was thinking of what Hugh Calderwell had once said to her: that Bertram Henshaw would never love any girl seriously; that it would always be the turn of her head or the tilt of her chin that he loved — to paint.

"Well; only what?" demanded Bertram.

Billy blushed the more deeply, but she gave a light laugh.

"Nothing, only something Hugh Calderwell said to me once. You see, Bertram, I don't think Hugh ever thought you would — marry."

"Oh, didn't he?" bridled Bertram. "Well, that only goes to show how much he knows about it. Er — did you announce it — to him?" Bertram's voice was almost savage now.

Billy smiled.

"No; but I did to his sister, and she'll tell him. Oh, Bertram, such a time as I had over those notes," went on Billy, with a chuckle. Her eyes were dancing, and she was seeming more like her usual self, Bertram thought. "You see there were such a lot of things I wanted to say, about what a dear you were, and how much I — I liked you, and that you had such lovely eyes, and a nose — "

"Billy!" This time it was Bertram who was sitting erect in pale horror.

Billy threw him a roguish glance.

"Goosey! You are as bad as Aunt Hannah! I said that was what I *wanted* to say. What I really said was — quite another matter," she finished with a saucy uptilting of her chin.

Bertram relaxed with a laugh.

"You witch!" His admiring eyes still lingered

on her face. "Billy, I'm going to paint you sometime in just that pose. You're adorable!"

"Pooh! Just another face of a girl," teased the adorable one.

Bertram gave a sudden exclamation.

"There! And I haven't told you, yet. Guess what my next commission is."

"To paint a portrait?"

"Yes."

"Can't. Who is it?"

"J. G. Winthrop's daughter."

"Not *the* J. G. Winthrop?"

"The same."

"Oh, Bertram, how splendid!"

"Isn't it? And then the girl herself! Have you seen her? But you haven't, I know, unless you met her abroad. She hasn't been in Boston for years until now."

"No, I haven't seen her. Is she so *very* beautiful?" Billy spoke a little soberly.

"Yes — and no." The artist lifted his head alertly. What Billy called his "painting look" came to his face. "It isn't that her features are so regular — though her mouth and chin are perfect. But her face has so much character, and there's an elusive something about her eyes — Jove! If I can only catch it, it'll be the best thing yet that I've ever done, Billy."

"Will it? I'm so glad — and you'll get it, I know you will," claimed Billy, clearing her throat a little nervously.

"I wish I felt so sure," sighed Bertram. "But it'll be a great thing if I do get it — J. G. Winthrop's daughter, you know, besides the merit of the likeness itself."

"Yes; yes, indeed!" Billy cleared her throat again. "You've seen her, of course, lately?"

"Oh, yes. I was there half the morning discussing the details — sittings and costume, and deciding on the pose."

"Did you find one — to suit?"

"Find one!" The artist made a despairing gesture. "I found a dozen that I wanted. The trouble was to tell which I wanted the most."

Billy gave a nervous little laugh.

"Isn't that — unusual?" she asked.

Bertram lifted his eyebrows with a quizzical smile.

"Well, they aren't all Marguerite Winthrops," he reminded her.

"Marguerite!" cried Billy. "Oh, is her name Marguerite? I do think Marguerite is the dearest name!" Billy's eyes and voice were wistful.

"I don't — not the *dearest*. Oh, it's all well enough, of course, but it can't be compared for a moment to — well, say, 'Billy'!"

Billy smiled, but she shook her head.

"I'm afraid you're not a good judge of names," she objected.

"Yes, I am; though, for that matter, I should love your name, no matter what it was."

"Even if 'twas 'Mary Jane,' eh?" bantered Billy. "Well, you'll have a chance to find out how you like that name pretty quick, sir. We're going to have one here."

"You're going to have a Mary Jane here? Do you mean that Rosa's going away?"

"Mercy! I hope not," shuddered Billy. "You don't find a Rosa in every kitchen — and never in employment agencies! My Mary Jane is a niece of Aunt Hannah's, — or rather, a cousin. She's coming to Boston to study music, and I've invited her here. We've asked her for a month, though I presume we shall keep her right along."

Bertram frowned.

"Well, of course, that's very nice for — *Mary Jane*," he sighed with meaning emphasis.

Billy laughed.

"Don't worry, dear. She won't bother us any."

"Oh, yes, she will," sighed Bertram. "She'll be 'round — lots; you see if she isn't. Billy, I think sometimes you're almost too kind — to other folks."

"Never!" laughed Billy. "Besides, what would you have me do when a lonesome young girl was coming to Boston? Anyhow, *you're* not the one to talk, young man. I've known *you* to take in a lonesome girl and give her a home," she flashed merrily.

Bertram chuckled.

"Jove! What a time that was!" he exclaimed, regarding his companion with fond eyes. "And Spunk, too! Is she going to bring a Spunk?"

"Not that I've heard," smiled Billy; "but she *is* going to wear a pink."

"Not really, Billy?"

"Of course she is! I told her to. How do you suppose we could know her when we saw her, if she didn't?" demanded the girl, indignantly. "And what is more, sir, there will be *two* pinks worn this time. *I* sha'n't do as Uncle William did, and leave off my pink. Only think what long minutes — that seemed hours of misery — I spent waiting there in that train-shed, just because I didn't know which man was my Uncle William!"

Bertram laughed and shrugged his shouiders.

"Well, your Mary Jane won't probably turn out to be quite such a bombshell as our Billy did — unless she should prove to be a boy," he added whimsically. "Oh, but Billy, she *can't*

turn out to be such a dear treasure," finished the man. And at the adoring look in his eyes Billy blushed deeply — and promptly forgot all about Mary Jane and her pink.

CHAPTER IV

FOR MARY JANE

"I HAVE a letter here from Mary Jane, my dear," announced Aunt Hannah at the luncheon table one day.

"Have you?" Billy raised interested eyes from her own letters. "What does she say?"

"She will be here Thursday. Her train is due at the South Station at four-thirty. She seems to be very grateful to you for your offer to let her come right here for a month; but she says she's afraid you don't realize, perhaps, just what you are doing — to take her in like that, with her singing, and all."

"Nonsense! She doesn't refuse, does she?"

"Oh, no; she doesn't refuse — but she doesn't accept either, exactly, as I can see. I've read the letter over twice, too. I'll let you judge for yourself by and by, when you have time to read it."

Billy laughed.

"Never mind. I don't want to read it. She's just a little shy about coming, that's all. She'll

stay all right, when we come to meet her. What time did you say it was, Thursday?"

"Half past four, South Station."

"Thursday, at half past four. Let me see — that's the day of the Carletons' 'At Home,' isn't it?"

"Oh, my grief and conscience, yes! But I had forgotten it. What shall we do?"

"Oh, that will be easy. We'll just go to the Carletons' early and have John wait, then take us from there to the South Station. Meanwhile we'll make sure that the little blue room is all ready for her. I put in my white enamel work-basket yesterday, and that pretty little blue case for hairpins and curling tongs that I bought at the fair. I want the room to look homey to her, you know."

"As if it could look any other way, if *you* had anything to do with it," sighed Aunt Hannah, admiringly.

Billy laughed.

"If we get stranded we might ask the Henshaw boys to help us out, Aunt Hannah. They'd probably suggest guns and swords. That's the way they fixed up *my* room."

Aunt Hannah raised shocked hands of protest.

"As if we would! Mercy, what a time that was!"

Billy laughed again.

"I never shall forget, *never*, my first glimpse of that room when Mrs. Hartwell switched on the lights. Oh, Aunt Hannah, I wish you could have seen it before they took out those guns and spiders!"

"As if I didn't see quite enough when I saw William's face that morning he came for me!" retorted Aunt Hannah, spiritedly.

"Dear Uncle William! What an old saint he has been all the way through," mused Billy aloud. "And Cyril — who would ever have believed that the day would come when Cyril would say to me, as he did last night, that he felt as if Marie had been gone a month. It's been just seven days, you know."

"I know. She comes to-morrow, doesn't she?"

"Yes, and I'm glad. I shall tell Marie she needn't leave Cyril on *my* hands again. Bertram says that at home Cyril hasn't played a dirge since his engagement; but I notice that up here — where Marie might be, but isn't — his tunes would never be mistaken for ragtime. By the way," she added, as she rose from the table, "that's another surprise in store for Hugh Calderwell. He always declared that Cyril wasn't a marrying man, either, any more than Bertram. You know he said Bertram only cared for girls

to paint; but — " She stopped and looked inquiringly at Rosa, who had appeared at that moment in the hall doorway.

" It's the telephone, Miss Neilson. Mr. Bertram Henshaw wants you."

A few minutes later Aunt Hannah heard Billy at the piano. For fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes the brilliant scales and arpeggios rippled through the rooms and up the stairs to Aunt Hannah, who knew, by the very sound of them, that some unusual nervousness was being worked off at the finger tips that played them. At the end of forty-five minutes Aunt Hannah went down-stairs.

" Billy, my dear, excuse me, but have you forgotten what time it is? Weren't you going out with Bertram? "

Billy stopped playing at once, but she did not turn her head. Her fingers busied themselves with some music on the piano.

" We aren't going, Aunt Hannah," she said. " Bertram can't."

" *Can't!* "

" Well, he didn't want to — so of course I said not to. He's been painting this morning on a new portrait, and she said he might stay to luncheon and keep right on for a while this afternoon, if he liked. And — he did like, so he stayed."

"Why, how — how —" Aunt Hannah stopped helplessly.

"Oh, no, not at all," interposed Billy, lightly. "He told me all about it the other night. It's going to be a very wonderful portrait; and, of course, I wouldn't want to interfere with — his work!" And again a brilliant scale rippled from Billy's fingers after a crashing chord in the bass.

Slowly Aunt Hannah turned and went up-stairs. Her eyes were troubled. Not since Billy's engagement had she heard Billy play like that.

Bertram did not find a pensive Billy awaiting him that evening. He found a bright-eyed, flushed-cheeked Billy, who let herself be kissed — once — but who did not kiss back; a blithe, elusive Billy, who played tripping little melodies, and sang jolly little songs, instead of sitting before the fire and talking; a Billy who at last turned, and asked tranquilly:

"Well, how did the picture go?"

Bertram rose then, crossed the room, and took Billy very gently into his arms.

"Sweetheart, you were a dear this noon to let me off like that," he began in a voice shaken with emotion. "You don't know, perhaps, exactly what you did. You see, I was nearly wild between wanting to be with you, and wanting to go on with my work. And I was just at that

point where one little word from you, one hint that you wanted me to come anyway — and I should have come. But you didn't say it, nor hint it. Like the brave little bit of inspiration that you are, you bade me stay and go on with my work."

The "inspiration's" head drooped a little lower, but this only brought a wealth of soft bronze hair to just where Bertram could lay his cheek against it — and Bertram promptly took advantage of his opportunity. "And so I stayed, Billy, and I did good work; I know I did good work. Why, Billy," — Bertram stepped back now, and held Billy by the shoulders at arms' length — "Billy, that's going to be the best work I've ever done. I can see it coming even now, under my fingers."

Billy lifted her head and looked into her lover's face. His eyes were glowing. His cheeks were flushed. His whole countenance was aflame with the soul of the artist who sees his vision taking shape before him. And Billy, looking at him, felt suddenly — ashamed.

"Oh, Bertram, I'm proud, proud, *proud* of you!" she breathed. "Come, let's go over to the fire — and talk!"

CHAPTER V

MARIE SPEAKS HER MIND

BILLY with John and Peggy met Marie Hawthorn at the station. "Peggy" was short for "Pegasus," and was what Billy always called her luxurious, seven-seated touring car.

"I simply won't call it 'automobile,'" she had declared when she bought it. "In the first place, it takes too long to say it, and in the second place, I don't want to add one more to the nineteen different ways to pronounce it that I hear all around me every day now. As for calling it my 'car,' or my 'motor car'—I should expect to see a Pullman or one of those huge black trucks before my door, if I ordered it by either of those names. Neither will I insult the beautiful thing by calling it a 'machine.' Its name is Pegasus. I shall call it 'Peggy.'"

And "Peggy" she called it. John sniffed his disdain, and Billy's friends made no secret of their amused tolerance; but, in an astonishingly short time, half the automobile owners of her

acquaintance were calling their own cars "Peggy"; and even the dignified John himself was heard to order "some gasoline for Peggy," quite as a matter of course.

When Marie Hawthorn stepped from the train at the North Station she greeted Billy with affectionate warmth, though at once her blue eyes swept the space beyond expectantly and eagerly.

Billy's lips curved in a mischievous smile.

"No, he didn't come," she said. "He didn't want to — a little bit."

Marie grew actually pale.

"Didn't *want* to!" she stammered.

Billy gave her a spasmodic hug.

"Goosey! No, he didn't — a *little* bit; but he did a great *big* bit. As if you didn't know he was dying to come, Marie! But he simply couldn't — something about his concert Monday night. He told me over the telephone; but between his joy that you were coming, and his rage that he couldn't see you the first minute you did come, I couldn't quite make out what was the trouble. But he's coming to dinner to-night, so he'll doubtless tell you all about it."

Marie sighed her relief.

"Oh, that's all right then. I was afraid he was sick — when I didn't see him."

Billy laughed softly.

"No, he isn't sick, Marie; but you needn't go away again before the wedding — not to leave him on my hands. I wouldn't have believed Cyril Henshaw, confirmed old bachelor and avowed woman-hater, could have acted the part of a love-sick boy as he has the last week or two."

The rose-flush on Marie's cheek spread to the roots of her fine yellow hair.

"Billy, dear, he — he didn't!"

"Marie, dear — he — he did!"

Marie laughed. She did not say anything, but the rose-flush deepened as she occupied herself very busily in getting her trunk-check from the little hand bag she carried.

Cyril was not mentioned again until the two girls, veils tied and coats buttoned, were snugly ensconced in the tonneau, and Peggy's nose was turned toward home. Then Billy asked:

"Have you settled on where you're going to live?"

"Not quite. We're going to talk of that to-night; but we *do* know that we aren't going to live at the Strata."

"Marie!"

Marie stirred uneasily at the obvious disappointment and reproach in her friend's voice.

"But, dear, it wouldn't be wise, I'm sure,"

she argued hastily. "There will be you and Bertram — "

"We sha'n't be there for a year, nearly," cut in Billy, with swift promptness. "Besides, I think it would be lovely — all together."

Marie smiled, but she shook her head.

"Lovely — but not practical, dear."

Billy laughed ruefully.

"I know; you're worrying about those puddings of yours. You're afraid somebody is going to interfere with your making quite so many as you want to; and Cyril is worrying for fear there'll be somebody else in the circle of his shaded lamp besides his little Marie with the light on her hair, and the mending basket by her side."

"Billy, what are you talking about?"

Billy threw a roguish glance into her friend's amazed blue eyes.

"Oh, just a little picture Cyril drew once for me of what home meant for him: a room with a table and a shaded lamp, and a little woman beside it with the light on her hair and a great basket of sewing by her side."

Marie's eyes softened.

"Did he say — that?"

"Yes. Oh, he declared he shouldn't want her to sit under that lamp all the time, of course; but he hoped she'd like that sort of thing."

Marie threw a quick glance at the stolid back of John beyond the two empty seats in front of them. Although she knew he could not hear her words, instinctively she lowered her voice.

"Did you know — then — about — me?" she asked, with heightened color.

"No, only that there was a girl somewhere who, he hoped, would sit under the lamp some day. And when I asked him if the girl did like that sort of thing, he said yes, he thought so; for she had told him once that the things she liked best of all to do were to mend stockings and make puddings. Then I knew, of course, 'twas you, for I'd heard you say the same thing. So I sent him right along out to you in the summer-house."

The pink flush on Marie's face grew to a red one. Her blue eyes turned again to John's broad back, then drifted to the long, imposing line of windowed walls and doorways on the right. The automobile was passing smoothly along Beacon Street now with the Public Garden just behind them on the left. After a moment Marie turned to Billy again.

"I'm so glad he wants — just puddings and stockings," she began a little breathlessly. "You see, for so long I supposed he *wouldn't* want anything but a very brilliant, talented wife who could

play and sing beautifully; a wife he'd be proud of — like you."

"Me? Nonsense!" laughed Billy. "Cyril never wanted me, and I never wanted him — only once for a few minutes, so to speak, when I thought I did. In spite of our music, we aren't a mite congenial. I like people around; he doesn't. I like to go to plays; he doesn't. He likes rainy days, and I abhor them. Mercy! Life with me for him would be one long jangling discord, my love, while with you it'll be one long sweet song!"

Marie drew a deep breath. Her eyes were fixed on a point far ahead up the curveless street.

"I hope it will, indeed!" she breathed.

Not until they were almost home did Billy say suddenly:

"Oh, did Cyril write you? A young relative of Aunt Hannah's is coming to-morrow to stay a while at the house."

"Er — yes, Cyril told me," admitted Marie.

Billy smiled.

"Didn't like it, I suppose; eh?" she queried shrewdly.

"N-no, I'm afraid he didn't — very well. He said she'd be — one more to be around."

"There, what did I tell you?" dimpled Billy. "You can see what you're coming to when you do get that shaded lamp and the mending basket!"

A moment later, coming in sight of the house, Billy saw a tall, smooth-shaven man standing on the porch. The man lifted his hat and waved it gayly, baring a slightly bald head to the sun.

"It's Uncle William — bless his heart!" cried Billy. "They're all coming to dinner, then he and Aunt Hannah and Bertram and I are going down to the Hollis Street Theatre and let you and Cyril have a taste of what that shaded lamp is going to be. I hope you won't be lonesome," she finished mischievously, as the car drew up before the door.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE SIGN OF THE PINK

AFTER a week of beautiful autumn weather, Thursday dawned raw and cold. By noon an east wind had made the temperature still more uncomfortable.

At two o'clock Aunt Hannah tapped at Billy's chamber door. She showed a troubled face to the girl who answered her knock.

"Billy, *would* you mind very much if I asked you to go alone to the Carletons' and to meet Mary Jane?" she inquired anxiously.

"Why, no — that is, of course I should *mind*, dear, because I always like to have you go to places with me. But it isn't necessary. You aren't sick; are you?"

"N-no, not exactly; but I have been sneezing all the morning, and taking camphor and sugar to break it up — if it is a cold. But it is so raw and Novemberish out, that —"

"Why, of course you sha'n't go, you poor dear! Mercy! don't get one of those dreadful colds on to you before the wedding! Have you felt

a draft? Where's another shawl?" Billy turned and cast searching eyes about the room — Billy always kept shawls everywhere for Aunt Hannah's shoulders and feet. Bertram had been known to say, indeed, that a room, according to Aunt Hannah, was not fully furnished unless it contained from one to four shawls, assorted as to size and warmth. Shawls, certainly, did seem to be a necessity with Aunt Hannah, as she usually wore from one to three at the same time — which again caused Bertram to declare that he always counted Aunt Hannah's shawls when he wished to know what the thermometer was.

"No, I'm not cold, and I haven't felt a draft," said Aunt Hannah now. "I put on my thickest gray shawl this morning with the little pink one for down-stairs, and the blue one for breakfast; so you see I've been very careful. But I *have* sneezed six times, so I think 'twould be safer not to go out in this east wind. You were going to stop for Mrs. Granger, anyway, weren't you? So you'll have her with you for the tea."

"Yes, dear, don't worry. I'll take your cards and explain to Mrs. Carleton and her daughters."

"And, of course, as far as Mary Jane is concerned, I don't know her any more than you do; so I couldn't be any help there," sighed Aunt Hannah.

"Not a bit," smiled Billy, cheerily. "Don't give it another thought, my dear. I sha'n't have a bit of trouble. All I'll have to do is to look for a girl alone with a pink. Of course I'll have mine on, too, and she'll be watching for me. So just run along and take your nap, dear, and be all rested and ready to welcome her when she comes," finished Billy, stooping to give the soft, faintly pink cheek a warm kiss.

"Well, thank you, my dear; perhaps I will," sighed Aunt Hannah, drawing the gray shawl about her as she turned away contentedly.

Mrs. Carleton's tea that afternoon was, for Billy, not an occasion of unalloyed joy. It was the first time she had appeared at a gathering of any size since the announcement of her engagement; and, as she dolefully told Bertram afterwards, she had very much the feeling of the picture hung on the wall.

"And they *did* put up their lorgnettes and say, 'Is *that* the one?'" she declared; "and I know some of them finished with 'Did you ever?' too," she sighed.

But Billy did not stay long in Mrs. Carleton's softly-lighted, flower-perfumed rooms. At ten minutes past four she was saying good-by to a group of friends who were vainly urging her to remain longer.

"I can't — I really can't," she declared. "I'm due at the South Station at half past four to meet a Miss Arkwright, a young cousin of Aunt Hannah's, whom I've never seen before. We're to meet at the sign of the pink," she explained smilingly, just touching the single flower she wore.

Her hostess gave a sudden laugh.

"Let me see, my dear; if I remember rightly, you've had experience before, meeting at this sign of the pink. At least, I have a very vivid recollection of Mr. William Henshaw's going once to meet a *boy* with a pink, who turned out to be a girl. Now, to even things up, your girl should turn out to be a boy!"

Billy smiled and reddened.

"Perhaps — but I don't think to-day will strike the balance," she retorted, backing toward the door. "This young lady's name is 'Mary Jane'; and I'll leave it to you to find anything very masculine in that!"

It was a short drive from Mrs. Carleton's Commonwealth Avenue home to the South Station, and Peggy made as quick work of it as the narrow, congested cross streets would allow. In ample time Billy found herself in the great waiting-room, with John saying respectfully in her ear:

"The man says the train comes in on Track Fourteen, Miss, an' it's on time."

At twenty-nine minutes past four Billy left her seat and walked down the train-shed platform to Track Number Fourteen. She had pinned the pink now to the outside of her long coat, and it made an attractive dash of white against the dark-blue velvet. Billy was looking particularly lovely to-day. Framing her face was the big dark-blue velvet picture hat with its becoming white plumes.

During the brief minutes' wait before the clanging locomotive puffed into view far down the long track, Billy's thoughts involuntarily went back to that other watcher beside a train gate not quite five years before.

"Dear Uncle William!" she murmured tenderly. Then suddenly she laughed — so nearly aloud that a man behind her gave her a covert glance from curious eyes. "My! but what a jolt I must have been to Uncle William!" Billy was thinking.

The next minute she drew nearer the gate and regarded with absorbed attention the long line of passengers already sweeping up the narrow aisle between the cars.

Hurrying men came first, with long strides, and eyes that looked straight ahead. These

Billy let pass with a mere glance. The next group showed a sprinkling of women — women whose trig hats and linen collars spelled promptness as well as certainty of aim and accomplishment. To these, also, Billy paid scant attention. Couples came next — the men anxious-eyed, and usually walking two steps ahead of their companions; the women plainly flustered and hurried, and invariably buttoning gloves or gathering up trailing ends of scarfs or boas.

The crowd was thickening fast, now, and Billy's eyes were alert. Children were appearing, and young women walking alone. One of these wore a bunch of violets. Billy gave her a second glance. Then she saw a pink — but it was on the coat lapel of a tall young fellow with a brown beard; so with a slight frown she looked beyond down the line.

Old men came now, and old women; fleshy women, and women with small children and babies. Couples came, too — dawdling couples, plainly newly married: the men were not two steps ahead, and the women's gloves were buttoned and their furs in place.

Gradually the line thinned, and soon there were left only an old man with a cane, and a young woman with three children. Yet nowhere had Billy seen a girl wearing a white carnation, and walking alone.

With a deeper frown on her face Billy turned and looked about her. She thought that somewhere in the crowd she had missed Mary Jane, and that she would find her now, standing near. But there was no one standing near except the good-looking young fellow with the little pointed brown beard, who, as Billy noticed a second time, was wearing a white carnation.

As she glanced toward him, their eyes met. Then, to Billy's unbounded amazement, the man advanced with uplifted hat.

"I beg your pardon, but is not this — Miss Neilson?"

Billy drew back with just a touch of hauteur.

"Y-yes," she murmured.

"I thought so — yet I was expecting to see you with Aunt Hannah. I am M. J. Arkwright, Miss Neilson."

For a brief instant Billy stared dazedly.

"You don't mean — Mary Jane?" she gasped.

"I'm afraid I do." His lips twitched.

"But I thought — we were expecting —" She stopped helplessly. For one more brief instant she stared; then, suddenly, a swift change came to her face. Her eyes danced.

"Oh — oh!" she chuckled. "How perfectly funny! You *have* evened things up, after all. To think that Mary Jane should be a —"

She paused and flashed almost angrily suspicious eyes into his face. "But mine *was* 'Billy,'" she cried. "Your name isn't really — Mary Jane'?"

"I am often called that." His brown eyes twinkled, but they did not swerve from their direct gaze into her own.

"But —" Billy hesitated, and turned her eyes away. She saw then that many curious glances were already being flung in her direction. The color in her cheeks deepened. With an odd little gesture she seemed to toss something aside. "Never mind," she laughed a little hysterically. "If you'll pick up your bag, please, Mr. — Mary Jane, and come with me. John and Peggy are waiting. Or — I forgot — you have a trunk, of course?"

The man raised a protesting hand.

"Thank you; but, Miss Neilson, really — I couldn't think of trespassing on your hospitality — now, you know."

"But we — we invited you," stammered Billy.

He shook his head.

"You invited *Miss* Mary Jane."

Billy bubbled into low laughter.

"I beg your pardon, but it *is* funny," she sighed. "You see *I* came once just the same way, and now to have the tables turned like this! What

will Aunt Hannah say — what will everybody say? Come, I want them to begin — to say it," she chuckled irrepressibly.

"Thank you, but I shall go to a hotel, of course. Later, if you'll be so good as to let me call, and explain — !"

"But I'm afraid Aunt Hannah will think —" Billy stopped abruptly. Some distance away she saw John coming toward them. She turned hurriedly to the man at her side. Her eyes still danced, but her voice was mockingly serious. "Really, Mr. Mary Jane, I'm afraid you'll have to come to dinner; then you can settle the rest with Aunt Hannah. John is almost upon us — and *I* don't want to make explanations. Do you?"

"John," she said airily to the somewhat dazed chauffeur (who had been told he was to meet a young woman), "take Mr. Arkwright's bag, please, and show him where Peggy is waiting. It will be five minutes, perhaps, before I can come — if you'll kindly excuse me," she added to Arkwright, with a flashing glance from merry eyes. "I have some — telephoning to do."

All the way to the telephone booth Billy was trying to bring order out of the chaos of her mind; but all the way, too, she was chuckling.

"To think that this thing should have happened to *me!*" she said, almost aloud. "And here I

am telephoning just like Uncle William — Bertram said Uncle William *did* telephone about *me!* "

In due course Billy had Aunt Hannah at the other end of the wire.

" Aunt Hannah, listen. I'd never have believed it, but it's happened. Mary Jane is — a man."

Billy heard a dismayed gasp and a muttered " Oh, my grief and conscience! " then a shaking " Wha-at? "

" I say, Mary Jane is a man." Billy was enjoying herself hugely.

" A *ma-an!* "

" Yes; a great big man with a brown beard. He's waiting now with John and I must go."

" But, Billy, I don't understand," chattered an agitated voice over the line. " He — he called himself ' Mary Jane.' He hasn't any business to be a big man with a brown beard! What shall we do? We don't want a big man with a brown beard — here! "

Billy laughed roguishly.

" I don't know. *You* asked him! How he will like that little blue room — Aunt Hannah! " Billy's voice turned suddenly tragic. " For pity's sake take out those curling tongs and hairpins, and the work-basket. I'd *never* hear the last of it if he saw those, I know. He's just that kind! "

A half stifled groan came over the wire.

"Billy, he can't stay here."

Billy laughed again.

"No, no, dear; he won't, I know. He says he's going to a hotel. But I had to bring him home to dinner; there was no other way, under the circumstances. He won't stay. Don't you worry. But good-by. I must go. *Remember those curling tongs!*" And the receiver clicked sharply against the hook.

In the automobile some minutes later, Billy and Mr. M. J. Arkwright were speeding toward Corey Hill. It was during a slight pause in the conversation that Billy turned to her companion with a demure:

"I telephoned Aunt Hannah, Mr. Arkwright. I thought she ought to be — warned."

"You are very kind. What did she say? — if I may ask."

There was a brief moment of hesitation before Billy answered.

"She said you called yourself 'Mary Jane,' and that you hadn't any business to be a big man with a brown beard."

Arkwright laughed.

"I'm afraid I owe Aunt Hannah an apology," he said. He hesitated, glanced admiringly at the glowing, half-averted face near him, then went

on decisively. He wore the air of a man who has set the match to his bridges. "I signed both letters 'M. J. Arkwright,' but in the first one I quoted a remark of a friend, and in that remark I was addressed as 'Mary Jane.' I did not know but Aunt Hannah knew of the nickname." (Arkwright was speaking a little slowly now, as if weighing his words.) "But when she answered, I saw that she did not; for, from something she said, I realized that she thought I was a real Mary Jane. For the joke of the thing I let it pass. But — if she noticed my letter carefully, she saw that I did not accept your kind invitation to give 'Mary Jane' a home."

"Yes, we noticed that," nodded Billy, merrily. "But we didn't think you meant it. You see we pictured you as a shy young thing. But, really," she went on with a low laugh, "you see your coming as a masculine 'Mary Jane' was particularly funny — for me; for, though perhaps you didn't know it, I came once to this very same city, wearing a pink, and was expected to be Billy, a boy. And only to-day a lady warned me that your coming might even things up. But I didn't believe it would — a Mary Jane!"

Arkwright laughed. Again he hesitated, and seemed to be weighing his words.

"Yes, I heard about that coming of yours.

I might almost say — that's why I — let the mistake pass in Aunt Hannah's letter," he said.

Billy turned with reproachful eyes.

"Oh, how could you? But then — it was a temptation!" She laughed suddenly. "What sinful joy you must have had watching me hunt for 'Mary Jane.'"

"I didn't," acknowledged the other, with unexpected candor. "I felt — ashamed. And when I saw you were there alone without Aunt Hannah, I came very near not speaking at all — until I realized that that would be even worse, under the circumstances."

"Of course it would," smiled Billy, brightly; "so I don't see but I shall have to forgive you, after all. And here we are at home, Mr. Mary Jane. By the way, what did you say that 'M. J.' did stand for?" she asked, as the car came to a stop.

The man did not seem to hear; at least he did not answer. He was helping his hostess to alight. A moment later a plainly agitated Aunt Hannah — her gray shawl topped with a huge black one — opened the door of the house.

CHAPTER VII

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW

At ten minutes before six on the afternoon of Arkwright's arrival, Billy came into the living-room to welcome the three Henshaw brothers, who, as was frequently the case, were dining at Hillside.

Bertram thought Billy had never looked prettier than she did this afternoon with the bronze sheen of her pretty house gown bringing out the bronze lights in her dark eyes and in the soft waves of her beautiful hair. Her countenance, too, carried a peculiar something that the artist's eye was quick to detect, and that the artist's fingers tingled to put on canvas.

"Jove! Billy," he said low in her ear, as he greeted her, "I wish I had a brush in my hand this minute. I'd have a 'Face of a Girl' that would be worth while!"

Billy laughed and dimpled her appreciation; but down in her heart she was conscious of a vague unrest. Billy wished, sometimes, that she did not so often seem to Bertram — a picture.

She turned to Cyril with outstretched hand.

"Oh, yes, Marie's coming," she smiled in answer to the quick shifting of Cyril's eyes to the hall doorway. "And Aunt Hannah, too. They're up-stairs."

"And Mary Jane?" demanded William, a little anxiously

"Will's getting nervous," volunteered Bertram, airily. "He wants to see Mary Jane. You see we've told him that we shall expect him to see that she doesn't bother us four too much, you know. He's expected always to remove her quietly but effectually, whenever he sees that she is likely to interrupt a tête-à-tête. Naturally, then, Will wants to see Mary Jane."

Billy began to laugh hysterically. She dropped into a chair and raised both her hands, palms outward.

"Don't, don't — please don't!" she choked, "or I shall die. I've had all I can stand, already."

"All you can stand?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she so — impossible?" This last was from Bertram, spoken softly, and with a hurried glance toward the hall.

Billy dropped her hands and lifted her head. By heroic effort she pulled her face into sobriety — all but her eyes — and announced:

"Mary Jane is — a man."

"Wha-at?"

"A *man!*"

"Billy!"

Three masculine forms sat suddenly erect.

"Yes. Oh, Uncle William, I know now just how you felt — I know, I know," gurgled Billy, incoherently. "There he stood with his pink just as I did — only he had a brown beard, and he didn't have Spunk — and I had to telephone to prepare folks, just as you did. And the room — the room! I fixed the room, too," she babbled breathlessly, "only I had curling tongs and hair pins in it instead of guns and spiders!"

"Child, child! what *are* you talking about?" William's face was red.

"A *man!* — *Mary Jane!*" Cyril was merely cross.

"Billy, what does this mean?" Bertram had grown a little white.

Billy began to laugh again, yet she was plainly trying to control herself.

"I'll tell you. I must tell you. Aunt Hannah is keeping him up-stairs so I can tell you," she panted. "But it was so funny, when I expected a girl, you know, to see him with his brown beard, and he was so tall and big! And, of course, it made me think how *I* came, and was a girl

when you expected a boy; and Mrs. Carleton had just said to-day that maybe this girl would even things up. Oh, it was so funny!"

"Billy, my — my dear," remonstrated Uncle William, mildly.

"But what *is* his name?" demanded Cyril.

"Did the creature sign himself 'Mary Jane'?" exploded Bertram.

"I don't know his name, except that it's 'M. J.' — and that's how he signed the letters. But he *is* called 'Mary Jane' sometimes, and in the letter he quoted somebody's speech — I've forgotten just how — but in it he was called 'Mary Jane,' and, of course, Aunt Hannah took him for a girl," explained Billy, grown a little more coherent now.

"Didn't he write again?" asked William.

"Yes."

"Well, why didn't he correct the mistake, then?" demanded Bertram.

Billy chuckled.

"He didn't want to, I guess. He thought it was too good a joke."

"Joke!" scoffed Cyril.

"But, see here, Billy, he isn't going to live here — now?" Bertram's voice was almost savage.

"Oh, no, he isn't going to live here — now," interposed smooth tones from the doorway.

"Mr. — Arkwright!" breathed Billy, confusedly.

Three crimson-faced men sprang to their feet. The situation, for a moment, threatened embarrassed misery for all concerned; but Arkwright, with a cheery smile, advanced straight toward Bertram, and held out a friendly hand.

"The proverbial fate of listeners," he said easily; "but I don't blame you at all. No, 'he' isn't going to live here," he went on, grasping each brother's hand in turn, as Billy murmured faint introductions; "and what is more, he hereby asks everybody's pardon for the annoyance his little joke has caused. He might add that he's heartily ashamed of himself, as well; but if any of you — " Arkwright turned to the three tall men still standing by their chairs — "if any of you had suffered what he has at the hands of a swarm of youngsters for that name's sake, you wouldn't blame him for being tempted to get what fun he could out of Mary Jane — if there ever came a chance!"

Naturally, after this, there could be nothing stiff or embarrassing. Billy laughed in relief, and motioned Mr. Arkwright to a seat near her. William said "Of course, of course!" and shook hands again. Bertram and Cyril laughed shamefacedly and sat down. Somebody said: "But

what does the 'M. J.' stand for, anyhow?" Nobody answered this, however; perhaps because Aunt Hannah and Marie appeared just then in the doorway.

Dinner proved to be a lively meal. In the newcomer, Bertram met his match for wit and satire; and "Mr. Mary Jane," as he was promptly called by every one but Aunt Hannah, was found to be a most entertaining guest.

After dinner somebody suggested music.

Cyril frowned, and got up abruptly. Still frowning, he turned to a bookcase near him and began to take down and examine some of the books.

Bertram twinkled and glanced at Billy.

"Which is it, Cyril?" he called with cheerful impertinence; "stool, piano, or audience that is the matter to-night?"

Only a shrug from Cyril answered.

"You see," explained Bertram, jauntily, to Arkwright, whose eyes were slightly puzzled, "Cyril never plays unless the piano and the pedals and the weather and your ears and my watch and his fingers are just right!"

"Nonsense!" scorned Cyril, dropping his book and walking back to his chair. "I don't feel like playing to-night; that's all."

"You see," nodded Bertram again.

"I see," bowed Arkwright with quiet amusement.

"I believe — Mr. Mary Jane — sings," observed Billy, at this point, demurely.

"Why, yes, of course," chimed in Aunt Hannah with some nervousness. "That's what she — I mean he — was coming to Boston for — to study music."

Everybody laughed.

"Won't you sing, please?" asked Billy. "Can you — without your notes? I have lots of songs if you want them."

For a moment — but only a moment — Arkwright hesitated; then he rose and went to the piano.

With the easy sureness of the trained musician his fingers dropped to the keys and slid into preliminary chords and arpeggios to test the touch of the piano; then, with a sweetness and purity that made every listener turn in amazed delight, a well-trained tenor began the "Thro' the leaves the night winds moving," of Schubert's Serenade.

Cyril's chin had lifted at the first tone. He was listening now with very obvious pleasure. Bertram, too, was showing by his attitude the keenest appreciation. William and Aunt Hannah, resting back in their chairs, were contentedly nodding their approval to each other. Marie in her corner was

motionless with rapture. As to Billy — Billy was plainly oblivious of everything but the song and the singer. She seemed scarcely to move or to breathe till the song's completion; then there came a low "Oh, how beautiful!" through her parted lips.

Bertram, looking at her, was conscious of a vague irritation.

"Arkwright, you're a lucky dog," he declared almost crossly. "I wish I could sing like that!"

"I wish I could paint a 'Face of a Girl,'" smiled the tenor as he turned from the piano.

"Oh, but, Mr. Arkwright, don't stop," objected Billy, springing to her feet and going to her music cabinet by the piano. "There's a little song of Nevin's I want you to sing. There, here it is. Just let me play it for you." And she slipped into the place the singer had just left.

It was the beginning of the end. After Nevin came De Koven, and after De Koven, Gounod. Then came Nevin again, Billy still playing the accompaniment. Next followed a duet. Billy did not consider herself much of a singer, but her voice was sweet and true, and not without training. It blended very prettily with the clear, pure tenor.

William and Aunt Hannah still smiled contentedly in their chairs, though Aunt Hannah had

reached for the pink shawl near her — the music had sent little shivers down her spine. Cyril, with Marie, had slipped into the little reception-room across the hall, ostensibly to look at some plans for a house, although — as everybody knew — they were not intending to build for a year.

Bertram, still sitting stiffly erect in his chair, was not conscious of a vague irritation now. He was conscious of a very real, and a very decided one — an irritation that was directed against himself, against Billy, and against this man, Arkwright; but chiefly against music, *per se*. He hated music. He wished he could sing. He wondered how long it took to teach a man to sing, anyhow; and he wondered if a man could sing — who never had sung.

At this point the duet came to an end, and Billy and her guest left the piano. Almost at once, after this, Arkwright made his very graceful adieus, and went off with his suit-case to the hotel where, as he had informed Aunt Hannah, his room was already engaged.

William went home then, and Aunt Hannah went up-stairs. Cyril and Marie withdrew into a still more secluded corner to look at their plans, and Bertram found himself at last alone with Billy. He forgot, then, in the blissful hour he

spent with her before the open fire, how he hated music; though he did say, just before he went home that night:

"Billy, how long does it take — to learn to sing?"

"Why, I don't know, I'm sure," replied Billy, abstractedly; then, with sudden fervor: "Oh, Bertram, hasn't Mr. Mary Jane a beautiful voice?"

Bertram wished then he had not asked the question; but all he said was:

"'Mr. Mary Jane,' indeed! What an absurd name!"

"But doesn't he sing beautifully?"

"Eh? Oh, yes, he sings all right," said Bertram's tongue. Bertram's manner said: "Oh, yes, anybody can sing."

CHAPTER VIII

M. J. OPENS THE GAME

On the morning after Cyril's first concert of the season, Billy sat sewing with Aunt Hannah in the little sitting-room at the end of the hall upstairs. Aunt Hannah wore only one shawl this morning, — which meant that she was feeling unusually well.

"Marie ought to be here to mend these stockings," remarked Billy, as she critically examined a tiny break in the black silk mesh stretched across the darning-egg in her hand; "only she'd want a bigger hole. She does so love to make a beautiful black latticework bridge across a yawning white china sea — and you'd think the safety of an army depended on the way each plank was laid, too," she concluded.

Aunt Hannah smiled tranquilly, but she did not speak.

"I suppose you don't happen to know if Cyril does wear big holes in his socks," resumed Billy, after a moment's silence. "If you'll believe it,

that thought popped into my head last night when Cyril was playing that concerto so superbly. It did, actually — right in the middle of the adagio movement, too. And in spite of my joy and pride in the music I had all I could do to keep from nudging Marie right there and then and asking her whether or not the dear man was hard on his hose."

"Billy!" gasped the shocked Aunt Hannah; but the gasp broke at once into what — in Aunt Hannah — passed for a chuckle. "If I remember rightly, when I was there at the house with you at first, my dear, William told me that Cyril wouldn't wear any sock after it came to mending."

"Horrors!" Billy waved her stocking in mock despair. "That will never do in the world. It would break Marie's heart. You know how she dotes on darning."

"Yes, I know," smiled Aunt Hannah. "By the way, where is she this morning?"

Billy raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"Gone to look at an apartment in Cambridge, I believe. Really, Aunt Hannah, between her home-hunting in the morning, and her furniture-and-rug hunting in the afternoon, and her poring over house-plans in the evening, I can't get her to attend to her clothes at all. Never did I see a bride so utterly indifferent to her trousseau as

Marie Hawthorn — and her wedding less than a month away!"

"But she's been shopping with you once or twice, since she came back, hasn't she? And she said it was for her trousseau."

Billy laughed.

"Her trousseau! Oh, yes, it was. I'll tell you what she got for her trousseau that first day. We started out to buy two hats, some lace for her wedding gown, some crêpe de Chine and net for a little dinner frock, and some silk for a couple of waists to go with her tailored suit; and what did we get? We purchased a new-style egg-beater and a set of cake tins. Marie got into the kitchen department and I simply couldn't get her out of it. But the next day I was not to be inveigled below stairs by any plaintive prayer for a nutmeg-grater or a soda spoon. She *shopped* that day, and to some purpose. We accomplished lots."

Aunt Hannah looked a little concerned.

"But she must have *some* things started!"

"Oh, she has — 'most everything now. *I've* seen to that. Of course her outfit is very simple, anyway. Marie hasn't much money, you know, and she simply won't let me do half what I want to. Still, she had saved up some money, and I've finally convinced her that a trousseau doesn't consist of egg-beaters and cake tins, and that

Cyril would want her to look pretty. That name will fetch her every time, and I've learned to use it beautifully. I think if I told her Cyril approved of short hair and near-sightedness she'd cut off her golden locks and don spectacles on the spot."

Aunt Hannah laughed softly.

"What a child you are, Billy! Besides, just as if Marie were the only one in the house who is ruled by a magic name!"

The color deepened in Billy's cheeks.

"Well, of course, any girl — cares something — for the man she loves. Just as if I wouldn't do anything in the world I could for Bertram!"

"Oh, that makes me think; who was that young woman Bertram was talking with last evening — just after he left us, I mean?"

"Miss Winthrop — Miss Marguerite Winthrop. Bertram is — is painting her portrait, you know."

"Oh, is that the one?" murmured Aunt Hannah. "Hm-m; well, she has a beautiful face."

"Yes, she has." Billy spoke very cheerfully. She even hummed a little tune as she carefully selected a needle from the cushion in her basket.

"There's a peculiar something in her face," mused Aunt Hannah, aloud.

The little tune stopped abruptly, ending in a nervous laugh.

"Dear me! I wonder how it feels to have a peculiar something in your face. Bertram, too, says she has it. He's trying to 'catch it,' he says. I wonder now — if he does catch it, does she lose it?" Flippant as were the words, the voice that uttered them shook a little.

Aunt Hannah smiled indulgently — Aunt Hannah had heard only the flippancy, not the shake.

"I don't know, my dear. You might ask him this afternoon."

Billy made a sudden movement. The china egg in her lap rolled to the floor.

"Oh, but I don't see him this afternoon," she said lightly, as she stooped to pick up the egg.

"Why, I'm sure he told me — " Aunt Hannah's sentence ended in a questioning pause.

"Yes, I know," nodded Billy, brightly; "but he's told me something since. He isn't going. He telephoned me this morning. Miss Winthrop wanted the sitting changed from to-morrow to this afternoon. He said he knew I'd understand."

"Why, yes; but — " Aunt Hannah did not finish her sentence. The whir of an electric bell had sounded through the house. A few moments later Rosa appeared in the open doorway.

"It's Mr. Arkwright, Miss. He said as how he had brought the music," she announced.

"Tell him I'll be down at once," directed the mistress of Hillside.

As the maid disappeared, Billy put aside her work and sprang lightly to her feet.

"Now wasn't that nice of him? We were talking last night about some duets he had, and he said he'd bring them over. I didn't know he'd come so soon, though."

Billy had almost reached the bottom of the stairway, when a low, familiar strain of music drifted out from the living-room. Billy caught her breath, and held her foot suspended. The next moment the familiar strain of music had become a lullaby — one of Billy's own — and sung now by a melting tenor voice that lingered caressingly and understandingly on every tender cadence.

Motionless and almost breathless, Billy waited until the last low "lul-la-by" vibrated into silence; then with shining eyes and outstretched hands she entered the living-room.

"Oh, that was — beautiful," she breathed.

Arkwright was on his feet instantly. His eyes, too, were alight.

"I could not resist singing it just once — here," he said a little unsteadily, as their hands met.

"But to hear my little song sung like that! I couldn't believe it was mine," choked Billy,

still plainly very much moved. "You sang it as I've never heard it sung before."

Arkwright shook his head slowly.

"The inspiration of the room — that is all," he said. "It is a beautiful song. All of your songs are beautiful."

Billy blushed rosily.

"Thank you. You know — more of them, then?"

"I think I know them all — unless you have some new ones out. Have you some new ones, lately?"

Billy shook her head.

"No; I haven't written anything since last spring."

"But you're going to?"

She drew a long sigh.

"Yes, oh, yes. I know that *now* —" With a swift biting of her lower lip Billy caught herself up in time. As if she could tell this man, this stranger, what she had told Bertram that night by the fire — that she knew that now, *now* she would write beautiful songs, with his love, and his pride in her, as incentives. "Oh, yes, I think I shall write more one of these days," she finished lightly. "But come, this isn't singing duets! I want to see the music you brought."

They sang then, one after another of the duets.

To Billy, the music was new and interesting. To Billy, too, it was new (and interesting) to hear her own voice blending with another's so perfectly — to feel herself a part of such exquisite harmony.

"Oh, oh!" she breathed ecstatically, after the last note of a particularly beautiful phrase. "I never knew before how lovely it was to sing duets."

"Nor I," replied Arkwright in a voice that was not quite steady.

Arkwright's eyes were on the enraptured face of the girl so near him. It was well, perhaps, that Billy did not happen to turn and catch their expression. Still, it might have been better if she had turned, after all. But Billy's eyes were on the music before her. Her fingers were busy with the fluttering pages, searching for another duet.

"Didn't you?" she murmured abstractedly. "I supposed *you'd* sung them before; but you see I never did — until the other night. There, let's try this one!"

"This one" was followed by another and another. Then Billy drew a long breath.

"There! that must positively be the last," she declared reluctantly. "I'm so hoarse now I can scarcely croak. You see, I don't pretend to sing, really."

"Don't you? You sing far better than some who do, anyhow," retorted the man, warmly.

"Thank you," smiled Billy; "that was nice of you to say so — for my sake — and the others aren't here to care. But tell me of yourself. I haven't had a chance to ask you yet; and — I think you said Mary Jane was going to study for Grand Opera."

Arkwright laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"She is; but, as I told Calderwell, she's quite likely to bring up in vaudeville."

"Calderwell! Do you mean — Hugh Calderwell?" Billy's cheeks showed a deeper color.

The man gave an embarrassed little laugh. He had not meant to let that name slip out just yet.

"Yes." He hesitated, then plunged on recklessly. "We tramped half over Europe together last summer."

"Did you?" Billy left her seat at the piano for one nearer the fire. "But this isn't telling me about your own plans," she hurried on a little precipitately. "You've studied before, of course. Your voice shows that."

"Oh, yes; I've studied singing several years, and I've had a year or two of church work, besides a little concert practice of a mild sort."

"Have you begun here, yet?"

"Y-yes, I've had my voice tried."

Billy sat erect with eager interest.

"They liked it, of course?"

Arkwright laughed.

"I'm not saying that."

"No, but I am," declared Billy, with conviction. "They couldn't help liking it."

Arkwright laughed again. Just how well they had "liked it" he did not intend to say. Their remarks had been quite too flattering to repeat even to this very plainly interested young woman —delightful and heart-warming as was this same show of interest, to himself.

"Thank you," was all he said.

Billy gave an excited little bounce in her chair.

"And you'll begin to learn rôles right away?"

"I already have, some — after a fashion — before I came here."

"Really? How splendid! Why, then you'll be acting them next right on the Boston Opera House stage, and we'll all go to hear you. How perfectly lovely! I can hardly wait."

Arkwright laughed — but his eyes glowed with pleasure.

"Aren't you hurrying things a little?" he ventured.

"But they do let the students appear," argued Billy. "I knew a girl last year who went on

in 'Aida,' and she was a pupil at the School. She sang first in a Sunday concert, then they put her in the bill for a Saturday night. She did splendidly — so well that they gave her a chance later at a subscription performance. Oh, you'll be there — and soon, too!"

"Thank you! I only wish the powers that could put me there had your flattering enthusiasm on the matter," he smiled.

"I don't worry any," nodded Billy, "only please don't 'arrive' too soon — not before the wedding, you know," she added jokingly. "We shall be too busy to give you proper attention until after that."

A peculiar look crossed Arkwright's face.

"The — *wedding?*" he asked, a little faintly.

"Yes. Didn't you know? My friend, Miss Hawthorn, is to marry Mr. Cyril Henshaw next month."

The man opposite relaxed visibly.

"Oh, *Miss Hawthorn!* No, I didn't know," he murmured; then, with sudden astonishment he added: "And to Mr. Cyril, the musician, did you say?"

"Yes. You seem surprised."

"I am." Arkwright paused, then went on almost defiantly. "You see, Calderwell was telling me only last September how very un-

marriageable all the Henshaw brothers were. So I am surprised — naturally," finished Arkwright, as he rose to take his leave.

A swift crimson stained Billy's face.

"But surely you must know that — that — "

"That he has a right to change his mind, of course," supplemented Arkwright smilingly, coming to her rescue in the evident confusion that would not let her finish her sentence. "But Calderwell made it so emphatic, you see, about all the brothers. He said that William had lost his heart long ago; that Cyril hadn't any to lose; and that Bertram — "

"But, Mr. Arkwright, Bertram is — is — " Billy had moistened her lips, and plunged hurriedly in to prevent Arkwright's next words. But again was she unable to finish her sentence, and again was she forced to listen to a very different completion from the smiling lips of the man at her side.

"Is an artist, of course," said Arkwright. "That's what Calderwell declared — that it would always be the tilt of a chin or the curve of a cheek that the artist loved — to paint."

Billy drew back suddenly. Her face paled. As if *now* she could tell this man that Bertram Henshaw was engaged to her! He would find it out soon, of course, for himself; and perhaps he,

like Hugh Calderwell, would think it was the curve of *her* cheek, or the tilt of *her* chin —

Billy lifted her chin very defiantly now as she held out her hand in good-by.

CHAPTER IX

A RUG, A PICTURE, AND A GIRL AFRAID

THANKSGIVING came. Once again the Henshaw brothers invited Billy and Aunt Hannah to spend the day with them. This time, however, there was to be an additional guest present in the person of Marie Hawthorn.

And what a day it was, for everything and everybody concerned! First the Strata itself: from Dong Ling's kitchen in the basement to Cyril's domain on the top floor, the house was as spick-and-span as Pete's eager old hands could make it. In the drawing-room and in Bertram's den and studio, great clusters of pink roses perfumed the air, and brightened the sombre richness of the old-time furnishings. Before the open fire in the den a sleek gray cat — adorned with a huge ribbon bow the exact shade of the roses (Bertram had seen to that!) — winked and blinked sleepy yellow eyes. In Bertram's studio the latest " Face of a Girl " had made way for a group of canvases and plaques, every one of which showed Billy Neilson in one pose or another. Up-stairs, where

William's chaos of treasures filled shelves and cabinets, the place of honor was given to a small black velvet square on which rested a pair of quaint Battersea enamel mirror knobs. In Cyril's rooms — usually so austerely bare — a handsome Oriental rug and several curtain-draped chairs hinted at purchases made at the instigation of a taste other than his own.

When the doorbell rang Pete admitted the ladies with a promptness that was suggestive of surreptitious watching at some window. On Pete's face the dignity of his high office and the delight of the moment were fighting for mastery. The dignity held firmly through Mrs. Stetson's friendly greeting; but it fled in defeat when Billy Neilson stepped over the threshold with a cheery "Good morning, Pete."

"Laws! But it's good to be seein' you here again," stammered the man, — delight now in sole possession.

"She'll be coming to stay, one of these days, Pete," smiled the eldest Henshaw, hurrying forward.

"I wish she had now," whispered Bertram, who, in spite of William's quick stride, had reached Billy's side first.

From the stairway came the patter of a man's slippered feet.

"The rug has come, and the curtains, too," called a "householder" sort of voice that few would have recognized as belonging to Cyril Henshaw. "You must all come up-stairs and see them after dinner." The voice, apparently, spoke to everybody; but the eyes of the owner of the voice plainly saw only the fair-haired young woman who stood a little in the shadow behind Billy, and who was looking about her now as at something a little fearsome, but very dear.

"You know — I've never been — where you live — before," explained Marie Hawthorn in a low, vibrant tone, when Cyril bent over her to take the furs from her shoulders.

In Bertram's den a little later, as hosts and guests advanced toward the fire, the sleek gray cat rose, stretched lazily, and turned her head with majestic condescension.

"Well, Spunkie, come here," commanded Billy, snapping her fingers at the slow-moving creature on the hearthrug. "Spunkie, when I am your mistress, you'll have to change either your name or your nature. As if I were going to have such a bunch of independent moderation as you masquerading as an understudy to my frisky little Spunk!"

Everybody laughed. William regarded his namesake with fond eyes as he said:

"Spunkie doesn't seem to be worrying." The cat had jumped into Billy's lap with a matter-of-course air that was unmistakable — and to Bertram, adorable. Bertram's eyes, as they rested on Billy, were even fonder than were his brother's.

"I don't think any one is — *worrying*," he said with quiet emphasis.

Billy smiled.

"I should think they might be," she answered. "Only think how dreadfully upsetting I was in the first place!"

William's beaming face grew a little stern.

"Nobody knew it but Kate — and she didn't *know* it; she only imagined it," he said tersely.

Billy shook her head.

"I'm not so sure," she demurred. "As I look back at it now, I think I can discern a few evidences myself — that I was upsetting. I was a bother to Bertram in his painting, I am sure."

"You were an inspiration," corrected Bertram. "Think of the posing you did for me."

A swift something like a shadow crossed Billy's face; but before her lover could question its meaning, it was gone.

"And I know I was a torment to Cyril." Billy had turned to the musician now.

"Well, I admit you were a little — upsetting,

at times," retorted that individual, with something of his old imperturbable rudeness.

"Nonsense!" cut in William, sharply. "You were never anything but a comfort in the house, Billy, my dear — and you never will be."

"Thank you," murmured Billy, demurely. "I'll remember that — when Pete and I disagree about the table decorations, and Dong Ling doesn't like the way I want my soup seasoned."

An anxious frown showed on Bertram's face.

"Billy," he said in a low voice, as the others laughed at her sally, "you needn't have Pete nor Dong Ling here if you don't want them."

"Don't want them!" echoed Billy, indignantly. "Of course I want them!"

"But — Pete *is* old, and — "

"Yes; and where's he grown old? For whom has he worked the last fifty years, while he's been growing old? I wonder if you think I'd let Pete leave this house as long as he *wants* to stay! As for Dong Ling — "

A sudden movement of Bertram's hand arrested her words. She looked up to find Pete in the doorway.

"Dinner is served, sir," announced the old butler, his eyes on his master's face.

William rose with alacrity, and gave his arm to Aunt Hannah.

"Well, I'm sure we're ready for dinner," he declared.

It was a good dinner, and it was well served. It could scarcely have been otherwise with Dong Ling in the kitchen and Pete in the dining-room doing their utmost to please. But even had the turkey been tough instead of tender, and even had the pies been filled with sawdust instead of with delicious mincemeat, it is doubtful if four at the table would have known the difference: Cyril and Marie at one end were discussing where to put their new sideboard in their dining-room, and Bertram and Billy at the other were talking of the next Thanksgiving, when, according to Bertram, the Strata would have the "dearest little mistress that ever was born." As if, under these circumstances, the tenderness of the turkey or the toothsomeness of the mince pie mattered! To Aunt Hannah and William, in the centre of the table, however, it did matter; so it was well, of course, that the dinner was a good one.

"And now," said Cyril, when dinner was over, "suppose you come up and see the rug."

In compliance with this suggestion, the six trailed up the long flights of stairs then, Billy carrying an extra shawl for Aunt Hannah — Cyril's rooms were always cool.

"Oh, yes, I knew we should need it," she nodded

to Bertram, as she picked up the shawl from the hall stand where she had left it when she came in. "That's why I brought it."

"Oh, my grief and conscience, Cyril, how *can* you stand it? — to climb stairs like this," panted Aunt Hannah, as she reached the top of the last flight and dropped breathlessly into the nearest chair — from which Marie had rescued a curtain just in time.

"Well, I'm not sure I could — if I were always to eat a Thanksgiving dinner just before," laughed Cyril. "Maybe I ought to have waited and let you rest an hour or two."

"But 'twould have been too dark, then, to see the rug," objected Marie. "It's a genuine Persian — a Kirman, you know; and I'm so proud of it," she added, turning to the others. "I wanted you to see the colors by daylight. Cyril likes it better, anyhow, in the daytime."

"Fancy Cyril *liking* any sort of a rug at any time," chuckled Bertram, his eyes on the rich, softly blended colors of the rug before him. "Honestly, Miss Marie," he added, turning to the little bride elect, "how did you ever manage to get him to buy *any* rug? He won't have so much as a ravelling on the floor up here to walk on."

A startled dismay came into Marie's blue eyes.

"Why, I thought he wanted rugs," she faltered. "I'm sure he said — "

"Of course I want rugs," interrupted Cyril, irritably. "I want them everywhere except in my own especial den. You don't suppose I want to hear other people clattering over bare floors all day, do you?"

"Of course not!" Bertram's face was preternaturally grave as he turned to the little music teacher. "I hope, Miss Marie, that you wear rubber heels on your shoes," he observed solicitously.

Even Cyril laughed at this, though all he said was:

"Come, come, I got you up here to look at the rug."

Bertram, however, was not to be silenced.

"And another thing, Miss Marie," he resumed, with the air of a true and tried adviser. "Just let me give you a pointer. I've lived with your future husband a good many years, and I know what I'm talking about."

"Bertram, be still," growled Cyril.

Bertram refused to be still.

"Whenever you want to know anything about Cyril, listen to his playing. For instance: if, after dinner, you hear a dreamy waltz or a sleepy nocturne, you may know that all is well. But if

on your ears there falls anything like a dirge, or the wail of a lost spirit gone mad, better look to your soup and see if it hasn't been scorched, or taste of your pudding and see if you didn't put in salt instead of sugar."

"Bertram, will you be still?" cut in Cyril, testily, again.

"After all, judging from what Billy tells me," resumed Bertram, cheerfully, "what I've said won't be so important to you, for you aren't the kind that scorches soups or uses salt for sugar. So maybe I'd better put it to you this way: if you want a new sealskin coat or an extra diamond tiara, tackle him when he plays like this!" And with a swift turn Bertram dropped himself to the piano stool and dashed into a rollicking melody that half the newsboys of Boston were whistling.

What happened next was a surprise to every one. Bertram, very much as if he were a naughty little boy, was jerked by a wrathful brother's hand off the piano stool. The next moment the wrathful brother himself sat at the piano, and there burst on five pairs of astonished ears a crashing dissonance which was but the prelude to music such as few of the party often heard.

Spellbound they listened while rippling runs and sonorous harmonies filled the room to overflowing, as if under the fingers of the player there

were — not the keyboard of a piano — but the violins, flutes, cornets, trombones, bass viols and kettledrums of a full orchestra.

Billy, perhaps, of them all, best understood. She knew that in those tripping melodies and crashing chords were Cyril's joy at the presence of Marie, his wrath at the flippancy of Bertram, his ecstasy at that for which the rug and curtains stood — the little woman sewing in the radiant circle of a shaded lamp. Billy knew that all this and more were finding voice at Cyril's finger tips. The others, too, understood in a way; but they, unlike Billy, were not in the habit of finding on a few score bits of wood and ivory a vent for their moods and fancies.

The music was softer now. The resounding chords and purling runs had become a bell-like melody that wound itself in and out of a maze of exquisite harmonies, now hiding, now coming out clear and unafraid, like a mountain stream emerging into a sunlit meadow from the leafy shadows of its forest home.

In a breathless hush the melody quivered into silence. It was Bertram who broke the pause with a long-drawn:

"By George!" Then, a little unsteadily: "If it's I that set you going like that, old chap, I'll come up and play ragtime every day!"

Cyril shrugged his shoulders and got to his feet.

"If you've seen all you want of the rug we'll go down-stairs," he said nonchalantly.

"But we haven't!" chorussed several indignant voices. And for the next few minutes not even the owner of the beautiful Kirman could find any fault with the quantity or the quality of the attention bestowed on his new possession. But Billy, under cover of the chatter, said reproachfully in his ear:

"Oh, Cyril, to think you can play like that — and won't — on demand!"

"I can't — on demand," shrugged Cyril again.

On the way down-stairs they stopped at William's rooms.

"I want you to see a couple of Batterseas I got last week," cried the collector eagerly, as he led the way to the black velvet square. "They're fine — and I think she looks like you," he finished, turning to Billy, and holding out one of the knobs, on which was a beautifully executed miniature of a young girl with dark, dreamy eyes.

"Oh, how pretty!" exclaimed Marie, over Billy's shoulder. "But what are they?"

The collector turned, his face alight.

"Mirror knobs. I've got lots of them. Would you like to see them — really? They're right here."

The next minute Marie found herself looking into a cabinet where lay a score or more of round and oval discs of glass, porcelain, and metal, framed in silver, gilt, and brass, and mounted on long spikes.

"Oh, how pretty," cried Marie again; "but how — how queer! Tell me about them, please."

William drew a long breath. His eyes glistened. William loved to talk — when he had a curio and a listener.

"I will. Our great-grandmothers used them, you know, to support their mirrors, or to fasten back their curtains," he explained ardently. "Now here's another Battersea enamel, but it isn't so good as my new ones — that face is almost a caricature."

"But what a beautiful ship — on that round one!" exclaimed Marie. "And what's this one? — glass?"

"Yes; but that's not so rare as the others. Still, it's pretty enough. Did you notice this one, with the bright red and blue and green on the white background? — regular Chinese mode of decoration, that is."

"Er — any time, William," began Bertram, mischievously; but William did not seem to hear.

"Now in this corner," he went on, warming

to his subject, "are the enamelled porcelains. They were probably made at the Worcester works — England, you know; and I think many of them are quite as pretty as the Batterseas. You see it was at Worcester that they invented that variation of the transfer printing process that they called bat printing, where they used oil instead of ink, and gelatine instead of paper. Now engravings for that kind of printing were usually in stipple work — dots, you know — so the prints on these knobs can easily be distinguished from those of the transfer printing. See? Now, this one is — "

"Er, of course, William, any time — " interposed Bertram again, his eyes twinkling.

William stopped with a laugh.

"Yes, I know. 'Tis time I talked of something else, Bertram," he conceded.

"But 'twas lovely, and I *was* interested, really," claimed Marie. "Besides, there are such a lot of things here that I'd like to see," she finished, turning slowly about.

"These are what he was collecting last year," murmured Billy, hovering over a small cabinet where were some beautiful specimens of antique jewelry: brooches, necklaces, armlets, Rajah rings, and anklets, gorgeous in color and exquisite in workmanship.

"Well, here is something you *will* enjoy," declared Bertram, with an airy flourish. "Do you see those teapots? Well, we can have tea every day in the year, and not use one of them but five times. I've counted. There are exactly seventy-three," he concluded, as he laughingly led the way from the room.

"How about leap year?" quizzed Billy.

"Ho! Trust Will to find another 'Old Blue' or a 'perfect treasure of a black basalt' by that time," shrugged Bertram.

Below William's rooms was the floor once Bertram's, but afterwards given over to the use of Billy and Aunt Hannah. The rooms were open to-day, and were bright with sunshine and roses; but they were very plainly unoccupied.

"And you don't use them yet?" remonstrated Billy, as she paused at an open door.

"No. These are Mrs. Bertram Henshaw's rooms," said the youngest Henshaw brother in a voice that made Billy hurry away with a dimpling blush.

"They were Billy's — and they can never seem any one's but Billy's, now," declared William to Marie, as they went down the stairs.

"And now for the den and some good stories before the fire," proposed Bertram, as the six reached the first floor again.

"But we haven't seen your pictures, yet," objected Billy.

Bertram made a deprecatory gesture.

"There's nothing much — " he began; but he stopped at once, with an odd laugh. "Well, I sha'n't say *that*," he finished, flinging open the door of his studio, and pressing a button that flooded the room with light. The next moment, as they stood before those plaques and panels and canvases — on each of which was a pictured "Billy" — they understood the change in his sentence, and they laughed appreciatively.

"'Much,' indeed!" exclaimed William.

"Oh, how lovely!" breathed Marie.

"My grief and conscience, Bertram! All these — and of Billy? I knew you had a good many, but — " Aunt Hannah paused impotently, her eyes going from Bertram's face to the pictures again.

"But how — when did you do them?" queried Marie.

"Some of them from memory. More of them from life. A lot of them were just sketches that I did when she was here in the house four or five years ago," answered Bertram; "like this, for instance." And he pulled into a better light a picture of a laughing, dark-eyed girl holding against her cheek a small gray kitten, with alert,

bright eyes. "The original and only Spunk," he announced.

"What a dear little cat!" cried Marie.

"You should have seen it — in the flesh," remarked Cyril, dryly. "No paint nor painter could imprison that untamed bit of Satanic mischief on any canvas that ever grew!"

Everybody laughed — everybody but Billy. Billy, indeed, of them all, had been strangely silent ever since they entered the studio. She stood now a little apart. Her eyes were wide, and a bit frightened. Her fingers were twisting the corners of her handkerchief nervously. She was looking to the right and to the left, and everywhere she saw — herself.

Sometimes it was her full face, sometimes her profile; sometimes there were only her eyes peeping from above a fan, or peering from out brown shadows of nothingness. Once it was merely the back of her head showing the mass of waving hair with its high lights of burnished bronze. Again it was still the back of her head with below it the bare, slender neck and the scarf-draped shoulders. In this picture the curve of a half-turned cheek showed plainly, and in the background was visible a hand holding four playing cards, at which the pictured girl was evidently looking. Sometimes it was a merry Billy with

dancing eyes; sometimes a demure Billy with long lashes caressing a flushed cheek. Sometimes it was a wistful Billy with eyes that looked straight into yours with peculiar appeal. But always it was — Billy.

"There, I think the tilt of this chin is perfect." It was Bertram speaking.

Billy gave a sudden cry. Her face whitened. She stumbled forward.

"No, no, Bertram, you — you didn't mean the — the tilt of the chin," she faltered wildly.

The man turned in amazement.

"Why — Billy!" he stammered. "Billy, what is it?"

The girl fell back at once. She tried to laugh lightly. She had seen the dismayed questioning in her lover's eyes, and in the eyes of William and the others.

"N-nothing," she gesticulated hurriedly. "It was nothing at all, truly."

"But, Billy, it *was* something." Bertram's eyes were still troubled. "Was it the picture? I thought you liked this picture."

Billy laughed again — this time more naturally.

"Bertram, I'm ashamed of you — expecting me to say I 'like' any of this," she scolded, with a wave of her hands toward the omnipresent Billy. "Why, I feel as if I were in a room with

a thousand mirrors, and that I'd been discovered putting rouge on my cheeks and lampblack on my eyebrows!"

William laughed fondly. Aunt Hannah and Marie gave an indulgent smile. Cyril actually chuckled. Bertram only still wore a puzzled expression as he laid aside the canvas in his hands.

Billy examined intently a sketch she had found with its back to the wall. It was not a pretty sketch; it was not even a finished one, and Billy did not in the least care what it was. But her lips cried interestedly:

"Oh, Bertram, what is this?"

There was no answer. Bertram was still engaged, apparently, in putting away some sketches. Over by the doorway leading to the den Marie and Aunt Hannah, followed by William and Cyril, were just disappearing behind a huge easel. In another minute the merry chatter of their voices came from the room beyond. Bertram hurried then straight across the studio to the girl still bending over the sketch in the corner.

"Bertram!" gasped Billy, as a kiss brushed her cheek.

"Pooh! They're gone. Besides, what if they did see? Billy, what was the matter with the tilt of that chin?"

Billy gave an hysterical little laugh — at least, Bertram tried to assure himself that it was a laugh, though it had sounded almost like a sob.

"Bertram, if you say another word about — about the tilt of that chin, I shall *scream!*" she panted.

"Why, Billy!"

With a nervous little movement Billy turned and began to reverse the canvases nearest her.

"Come, sir," she commanded gayly. "Billy has been on exhibition quite long enough. It is high time she was turned face to the wall to meditate, and grow more modest."

Bertram did not answer. Neither did he make a move to assist her. His ardent gray eyes were following her slim, graceful figure admiringly.

"Billy, it doesn't seem true, yet, that you're really mine," he said at last, in a low voice shaken with emotion.

Billy turned abruptly. A peculiar radiance shone in her eyes and glorified her face. As she stood, she was close to a picture on an easel and full in the soft glow of the shaded lights above it.

"Then you *do* want me," she began, "— just *me!* — not to —" she stopped short. The man opposite had taken an eager step toward her. On his face was the look she knew so well, the look

she had come almost to dread — the "painting look."

"Billy, stand just as you are," he was saying. "Don't move. Jove! But that effect is perfect with those dark shadows beyond, and just your hair and face and throat showing. I declare, I've half a mind to sketch — " But Billy, with a little cry, was gone.

CHAPTER X

A JOB FOR PETE — AND FOR BERTRAM

THE early days in December were busy ones, certainly, in the little house on Corey Hill. Marie was to be married the twelfth. It was to be a home wedding, and a very simple one — according to Billy, and according to what Marie had said it was to be. Billy still serenely spoke of it as a "simple affair," but Marie was beginning to be fearful. As the days passed, bringing with them more and more frequent evidences either tangible or intangible of orders to stationers, caterers, and florists, her fears found voice in a protest.

"But Billy, it was to be a *simple* wedding," she cried.

"And so it is."

"But what is this I hear about a breakfast?"

Billy's chin assumed its most stubborn squareness.

"I don't know, I'm sure, what you did hear," she retorted calmly.

"Billy!"

Billy laughed. The chin was just as stubborn, but the smiling lips above it graced it with an air of charming concession.

"There, there, dear," coaxed the mistress of Hillside, "don't fret. Besides, I'm sure I should think you, of all people, would want your guests *fed!*"

"But this is so elaborate, from what I hear."

"Nonsense! Not a bit of it."

"Rosa says there'll be salads and cakes and ices — and I don't know what all."

Billy looked concerned.

"Well, of course, Marie, if you'd *rather* have oatmeal and doughnuts," she began with kind solicitude; but she got no farther.

"Billy!" besought the bride elect. "Won't you be serious? And there's the cake in wedding boxes, too."

"I know, but boxes are so much easier and cleaner than — just fingers," apologized an anxiously serious voice.

Marie answered with an indignant, grieved glance and hurried on.

"And the flowers — roses, dozens of them, in December! Billy, I can't let you do all this for me."

"Nonsense, dear!" laughed Billy. "Why, I love to do it. Besides, when you're gone, just

think how lonesome I'll be! I shall have to adopt somebody else then — now that Mary Jane has proved to be nothing but a disappointing man instead of a nice little girl like you," she finished whimsically.

Marie did not smile. The frown still lay between her delicate brows.

"And for my trousseau — there were so many things that you simply would buy!"

"I didn't get one of the egg-beaters," Billy reminded her anxiously.

Marie smiled now, but she shook her head, too.

"Billy, I cannot have you do all this for me."

"Why not?"

At the unexpectedly direct question, Marie fell back a little.

"Why, because I — I can't," she stammered. "I can't get them for myself, and — and — "

"Don't you love me?"

A pink flush stole to Marie's face.

"Indeed I do, dearly."

"Don't I love you?"

The flush deepened.

"I — I hope so."

"Then why won't you let me do what I want to, and be happy in it? Money, just money, isn't any good unless you can exchange it for something you want. And just now I want pink roses

and ice cream and lace flounces for you. Marie," — Billy's voice trembled a little — " I never had a sister till I had you, and I have had such a good time buying things that I thought you wanted! But, of course, if you don't want them — " The words ended in a choking sob, and down went Billy's head into her folded arms on the desk before her.

Marie sprang to her feet and cuddled the bowed head in a loving embrace.

" But I do want them, dear; I want them all — every single one," she urged. " Now promise me — promise me that you'll do them all, just as you'd planned! You will, won't you? "

There was the briefest of hesitations, then came the muffled reply:

" Yes — if you really want them."

" I do, dear — indeed I do. I love pretty weddings, and I — I always hoped that I could have one — if I ever married. So you must know, dear, how I really do want all those things," declared Marie, fervently. " And now I must go. I promised to meet Cyril at Park Street at three o'clock." And she hurried from the room — and not until she was half-way to her destination did it suddenly occur to her that she had been urging, actually urging Miss Billy Neilson to buy for her pink roses, ice cream, and lace flounces.

Her cheeks burned with shame then. But almost at once she smiled.

"Now wasn't that just like Billy?" she was saying to herself, with a tender glow in her eyes.

It was early in December that Pete came one day with a package for Marie from Cyril. Marie was not at home, and Billy herself went downstairs to take the package from the old man's hands.

"Mr. Cyril said to give it to Miss Hawthorn," stammered the old servant, his face lighting up as Billy entered the room; "but I'm sure he wouldn't mind *your* taking it."

"I'm afraid I'll have to take it, Pete, unless you want to carry it back with you," she smiled. "I'll see that Miss Hawthorn has it the very first moment she comes in."

"Thank you, Miss. It does my old eyes good to see your bright face." He hesitated, then turned slowly. "Good day, Miss Billy."

Billy laid the package on the table. Her eyes were thoughtful as she looked after the old man, who was now almost to the door. Something in his bowed form appealed to her strangely. She took a quick step toward him.

"You'll miss Mr. Cyril, Pete," she said pleasantly.

The old man stopped at once and turned. He lifted his head a little proudly.

"Yes, Miss. I — I was there when he was born. Mr. Cyril's a fine man."

"Indeed he is. Perhaps it's your good care that's helped, some — to make him so," smiled the girl, vaguely wishing that she could say something that would drive the wistful look from the dim old eyes before her.

For a moment Billy thought she had succeeded. The old servant drew himself stiffly erect. In his eyes shone the loyal pride of more than fifty years' honest service. Almost at once, however, the pride died away, and the wistfulness returned.

"Thank ye, Miss; but I don't lay no claim to that, of course," he said. "Mr. Cyril's a fine man, and we shall miss him; but — I cal'late changes must come — to all of us."

Billy's brown eyes grew a little misty.

"I suppose they must," she admitted.

The old man hesitated; then, as if impelled by some hidden force, he plunged on:

"Yes; and they'll be comin' to you one of these days, Miss, and that's what I was wantin' to speak to ye about. I understand, of course, that when you get there you'll be wantin' younger blood to serve ye. My feet ain't so spry as they once was, and my old hands blunder sometimes,

in spite of what my head bids 'em do. So I wanted to tell ye — that of course I shouldn't expect to stay. I'd go."

As he said the words, Pete stood with head and shoulders erect, his eyes looking straight forward but not at Billy.

"Don't you *want* to stay?" The girlish voice was a little reproachful.

Pete's head drooped.

"Not if — I'm not wanted," came the husky reply.

With an impulsive movement Billy came straight to the old man's side and held out her hand.

"Pete!"

Amazement, incredulity, and a look that was almost terror crossed the old man's face; then a flood of dull red blotted them all out and left only worshipful rapture. With a choking cry he took the slim little hand in both his rough and twisted ones much as if he were possessing himself of a treasured bit of eggshell china.

"Miss Billy!"

"Pete, there aren't a pair of feet in Boston, nor a pair of hands, either, that I'd rather have serve me than yours, no matter if they stumble and blunder all day! I shall love stumbles and blunders — if you make them. Now run home,

and don't ever let me hear another syllable about your leaving!"

They were not the words Billy had intended to say. She had meant to speak of his long, faithful service, and of how much they appreciated it; but, to her surprise, Billy found her own eyes wet and her own voice trembling, and the words that she would have said she found fast shut in her throat. So there was nothing to do but to stammer out something — anything, that would help to keep her from yielding to that absurd and awful desire to fall on the old servant's neck and cry.

"Not another syllable!" she repeated sternly.

"Miss Billy!" choked Pete again. Then he turned and fled with anything but his usual dignity.

Bertram called that evening. When Billy came to him in the living-room, her slender self was almost hidden behind the swirls of damask linen in her arms.

Bertram's eyes grew mutinous.

"Do you expect me to hug all that?" he demanded.

Billy flashed him a mischievous glance.

"Of course not! You don't *have* to hug anything, you know."

For answer he impetuously swept the offend-

ing linen into the nearest chair and drew the girl into his arms.

"Oh! And see how you've crushed poor Marie's table-cloth!" she cried, with reproachful eyes.

Bertram sniffed imperturbably.

"I'm not sure but I'd like to crush Marie," he alleged.

"Bertram!"

"I can't help it. See here, Billy." He loosened his clasp and held the girl off at arm's length, regarding her with stormy eyes. "It's Marie, Marie, Marie — always. If I telephone in the morning, you've gone shopping with Marie. If I want you in the afternoon for something, you're at the dressmaker's with Marie. If I call in the evening — "

"I'm here," interrupted Billy, with decision.

"Oh, yes, you're here," admitted Bertram, aggrievedly, "and so are dozens of napkins, miles of table-cloths, and yards upon yards of lace and flummydiddles you call 'doilies.' They all belong to Marie, and they fill your arms and your thoughts full, until there isn't an inch of room for me. Billy, when is this thing going to end?"

Billy laughed softly. Her eyes danced.

"The twelfth; — that is, there'll be a — pause, then."

"Well, I'm thankful if — eh?" broke off the man, with a sudden change of manner. "What do you mean by 'a pause'?"

Billy cast down her eyes demurely.

"Well, of course *this* ends the twelfth with Marie's wedding; but I've sort of regarded it as an — understudy for one that's coming next October, you see."

"Billy, you darling!" breathed a supremely happy voice in a shell-like ear — Billy was not at arm's length now.

Billy smiled, but she drew away with gentle firmness.

"And now I must go back to my sewing," she said.

Bertram's arms did not loosen. His eyes had grown mutinous again.

"That is," she amended, "I must be practising my part of — the understudy, you know."

"You darling!" breathed Bertram again; this time, however, he let her go.

"But, honestly, is it all necessary?" he sighed despairingly, as she seated herself and gathered the table-cloth into her lap. "Do you have to do so much of it all?"

"I do," smiled Billy, "unless you want your brother to run the risk of leading his bride to the altar and finding her robed in a kitchen

apron with an egg-beater in her hand for a bouquet."

Bertram laughed.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"No, of course not — quite. But never have I seen a bride so utterly oblivious to clothes as Marie was till one day in despair I told her that Cyril never could bear a dowdy woman."

"As if Cyril, in the old days, ever could bear any sort of woman!" scoffed Bertram, merrily.

"I know; but I didn't mention that part," smiled Billy. "I just singled out the dowdy one."

"Did it work?"

Billy made a gesture of despair.

"Did it work! It worked too well. Marie gave me one horrified look, then at once and immediately she became possessed with the idea that she *was* a dowdy woman. And from that day to this she has pursued every lurking wrinkle and every fold awry, until her dressmaker's life isn't worth the living; and I'm beginning to think mine isn't, either, for I have to assure her at least four times every day now that she is *not* a dowdy woman."

"You poor dear," laughed Bertram. "No wonder you don't have time to give to me!"

A peculiar expression crossed Billy's face.

"Oh, but I'm not the *only* one who, at times, is otherwise engaged, sir," she reminded him.

"What do you mean?"

"There was yesterday, and last Monday, and last week Wednesday, and —"

"Oh, but you *let* me off, then," argued Bertram, anxiously. "And you said —"

"That I didn't wish to interfere with your work — which was quite true," interrupted Billy in her turn, smoothly. "By the way," — Billy was examining her stitches very closely now — "how is Miss Winthrop's portrait coming on?"

"Splendidly! — that is, it *was*, until she began to put off the sittings for her pink teas and folderols. She's going to Washington next week, too, to be gone nearly a fortnight," finished Bertram, gloomily.

"Aren't you putting more work than usual into this one — and more sittings?"

"Well, yes," laughed Bertram, a little shortly. "You see, she's changed the pose twice already."

"Changed it!"

"Yes. Wasn't satisfied. Fancied she wanted it different."

"But can't you — don't you have something to say about it?"

"Oh, yes, of course; and she claims she'll

yield to my judgment, anyhow. But what's the use? She's been a spoiled darling all her life, and in the habit of having her own way about everything. Naturally, under those circumstances, I can't expect to get a satisfactory portrait, if she's out of tune with the pose. Besides, I will own, so far her suggestions have made for improvement — probably because she's been happy in making them, so her expression has been good."

Billy wet her lips.

"I saw her the other night," she said lightly. (If the lightness was a little artificial Bertram did not seem to notice it.) "She is certainly — very beautiful."

"Yes." Bertram got to his feet and began to walk up and down the little room. His eyes were alight. On his face the "painting look" was king. "It's going to mean a lot to me — this picture, Billy. In the first place I'm just at the point in my career where a big success would mean a lot — and where a big failure would mean more. And this portrait is bound to be one or the other from the very nature of the thing."

"I-is it?" Billy's voice was a little faint.

"Yes. First, because of who the sitter is, and secondly because of what she is. She is, of course, the most famous subject I've had, and half the artistic world knows by this time that Marguerite

Winthrop is being done by Henshaw. You can see what it'll be — if I fail."

"But you won't fail, Bertram!"

The artist lifted his chin and threw back his shoulders.

"No, of course not; but —" He hesitated, frowned, and dropped himself into a chair. His eyes studied the fire moodily. "You see," he resumed, after a moment, "there's a peculiar, elusive something about her expression —" (Billy stirred restlessly and gave her thread so savage a jerk that it broke) "— a something that isn't easily caught by the brush. Anderson and Fullam — big fellows, both of them — didn't catch it. At least, I've understood that neither her family nor her friends are satisfied with *their* portraits. And to succeed where Anderson and Fullam failed — Jove! Billy, a chance like that doesn't come to a fellow twice in a lifetime!" Bertram was out of his chair, again, tramping up and down the little room.

Billy tossed her work aside and sprang to her feet. Her eyes, too, were alight, now.

"But you aren't going to fail, dear," she cried, holding out both her hands. "You're going to succeed!"

Bertram caught the hands and kissed first one then the other of their soft little palms.

"Of course I am," he agreed passionately, leading her to the sofa, and seating himself at her side.

"Yes, but you must really *feel* it," she urged; "feel the '*sure*' in yourself. You have to! — to do big things. That's what I told Mary Jane yesterday, when he was running on about what *he* wanted to do — in his singing, you know."

Bertram stiffened a little. A quick frown came to his face.

"Mary Jane, indeed! Of all the absurd names to give a full-grown, six-foot man! Billy, do, for pity's sake, call him by his name — if he's got one."

Billy broke into a rippling laugh.

"I wish I could, dear," she sighed ingenuously. "Honestly, it bothers me because I *can't* think of him as anything but 'Mary Jane.' It seems so silly!"

"It certainly does — when one remembers his beard."

"Oh, he's shaved that off now. He looks rather better, too."

Bertram turned a little sharply.

"Do you see the fellow — often?"

Billy laughed merrily.

"No. He's about as disgruntled as you are over the way the wedding monopolizes everything.

He's been up once or twice to see Aunt Hannah and to get acquainted, as he expresses it, and once he brought up some music and we sang; but he declares the wedding hasn't given him half a show."

"Indeed! Well, that's a pity, I'm sure," rejoined Bertram, icily.

Billy turned in slight surprise.

"Why, Bertram, don't you like Mary Jane?"

"Billy, for heaven's sake! *Hasn't* he got any name but that?"

Billy clapped her hands together suddenly.

"There, that makes me think. He told Aunt Hannah and me to guess what his name was, and we never hit it once. What do you think it is? The initials are M. J."

"I couldn't say, I'm sure. What is it?"

"Oh, he didn't tell us. You see he left us to guess it."

"Did he?"

"Yes," mused Billy, abstractedly, her eyes on the dancing fire. The next minute she stirred and settled herself more comfortably in the curve of her lover's arm. "But there! who cares what his name is? I'm sure I don't."

"Nor I," echoed Bertram in a voice that he tried to make not too fervent. He had not forgotten Billy's surprised: "Why, Bertram, don't you like Mary Jane?" and he did not like to call

forth a repetition of it. Abruptly, therefore, he changed the subject. "By the way, what did you do to Pete to-day?" he asked laughingly. "He came home in a seventh heaven of happiness babbling of what an angel straight from the sky Miss Billy was. Naturally I agreed with him on that point. But what did you do to him?"

Billy smiled.

"Nothing — only engaged him for our butler — for life."

"Oh, I see. That was dear of you, Billy."

"As if I'd do anything else! And now for Dong Ling, I suppose, some day."

Bertram chuckled.

"Well, maybe I can help you there," he hinted. "You see, his Celestial Majesty came to me himself the other day, and said, after sundry and various preliminaries, that he should be 'velly much glad' when the 'Little Missee' came to live with me, for then he could go back to China with a heart at rest, as he had money 'velly much plenty' and didn't wish to be 'Melican man' any longer."

"Dear me," smiled Billy, "what a happy state of affairs — for him. But for you — do you realize, young man, what that means for you? A new wife and a new cook all at once? And you know I'm not Marie!"

"Ho! I'm not worrying," retorted Bertram with a contented smile; "besides, as perhaps you noticed, it wasn't Marie that I asked — to marry me!"

CHAPTER XI

A CLOCK AND AUNT HANNAH

Mrs. Kate Hartwell, the Henshaw brothers' sister from the West, was expected on the tenth. Her husband could not come, she had written, but she would bring with her, little Kate, the youngest child. The boys, Paul and Egbert, would stay with their father.

Billy received the news of little Kate's coming with outspoken delight.

"The very thing!" she cried. "We'll have her for a flower girl. She was a dear little creature, as I remember her."

Aunt Hannah gave a sudden low laugh.

"Yes, I remember," she observed. "Kate told me, after you spent the first day with her, that you graciously informed her that little Kate was almost as nice as Spunk. Kate did not fully appreciate the compliment, I fear."

Billy made a wry face.

"Did I say that? Dear me! I *was* a terror in those days, wasn't I? But then," and she laughed softly, "really, Aunt Hannah, that was

the prettiest thing I knew how to say, for I considered Spunk the top-notch of desirability."

"I think I should have liked to know Spunk," smiled Marie from the other side of the sewing table.

"He was a dear," declared Billy. "I had another 'most as good when I first came to Hillside, but he got lost. For a time it seemed as if I never wanted another, but I've about come to the conclusion now that I do, and I've told Bertram to find one for me if he can. You see I shall be lonesome after you're gone, Marie, and I'll have to have *something*," she finished mischievously.

"Oh, I don't mind the inference — as long as I know your admiration of cats," laughed Marie.

"Let me see; Kate writes she is coming the tenth," murmured Aunt Hannah, going back to the letter in her hand.

"Good!" nodded Billy. "That will give time to put little Kate through her paces as flower girl."

"Yes, and it will give Big Kate time to *try* to make your breakfast a supper, and your roses pinks — or sunflowers," cut in a new voice, dryly.

"Cyril!" chorussed the three ladies in horror, adoration, and amusement — according to whether the voice belonged to Aunt Hannah, Marie, or Billy.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized; "but Rosa said you were in here sewing, and I told her not to bother. I'd announce myself. Just as I got to the door I chanced to hear Billy's speech, and I couldn't resist making the amendment. Maybe you've forgotten Kate's love of managing — but I haven't," he finished, as he sauntered over to the chair nearest Marie.

"No, I haven't — forgotten," observed Billy, meaningly.

"Nor I — nor anybody else," declared a severe voice — both the words and the severity being most extraordinary as coming from the usually gentle Aunt Hannah.

"Oh, well, never mind," spoke up Billy, quickly. "Everything's all right now, so let's forget it. She always meant it for kindness, I'm sure."

"Even when she told you in the first place what a — er — torment you were to us?" quizzed Cyril.

"Yes," flashed Billy. "She was being kind to *you*, then."

"Humph!" vouchsafed Cyril.

For a moment no one spoke. Cyril's eyes were on Marie, who was nervously trying to smooth back a few fluffy wisps of hair that had escaped from restraining combs and pins.

"What's the matter with the hair, little girl?" asked Cyril in a voice that was caressingly irritable. "You've been fussing with that long-suffering curl for the last five minutes!"

Marie's delicate face flushed painfully.

"It's got loose — my hair," she stammered, "and it looks so dowdy that way!"

Billy dropped her thread suddenly. She sprang for it at once, before Cyril could make a move to get it. She had to dive far under a chair to capture it — which may explain why her face was so very red when she finally reached her seat again.

On the morning of the tenth, Billy, Marie, and Aunt Hannah were once more sewing together, this time in the little sitting-room at the end of the hall up-stairs.

Billy's fingers, in particular, were flying very fast.

"I told John to have Peggy at the door at eleven," she said, after a time; "but I think I can finish running in this ribbon before then. I haven't much to do to get ready to go."

"I hope Kate's train won't be late," worried Aunt Hannah.

"I hope not," replied Billy; "but I told Rosa to delay luncheon, anyway, till we get here. I — " She stopped abruptly and turned a listening ear

toward the door of Aunt Hannah's room, which was open. A clock was striking. "Mercy! that can't be eleven now," she cried. "But it must be — it was ten before I came up-stairs." She got to her feet hurriedly.

Aunt Hannah put out a restraining hand.

"No, no, dear, that's half-past ten."

"But it struck eleven."

"Yes, I know. It does — at half-past ten."

"Why, the little wretch," laughed Billy, dropping back into her chair and picking up her work again. "The idea of its telling fibs like that and frightening people half out of their lives! I'll have it fixed right away. Maybe John can do it — he's always so handy about such things."

"But I don't want it fixed," demurred Aunt Hannah.

Billy stared a little.

"You don't want it fixed! Maybe you like to have it strike eleven when it's half-past ten!" Billy's voice was merrily sarcastic.

"Y-yes, I do," stammered the lady, apologetically. "You see, I — I worked very hard to fix it so it would strike that way."

"*Aunt Hannah!*"

"Well, I did," retorted the lady, with unexpected spirit. "I wanted to know what time it was in the night — I'm awake such a lot."

"But I don't see." Billy's eyes were perplexed. "Why must you make it tell fibs in order to — to find out the truth?" she laughed.

Aunt Hannah elevated her chin a little.

"Because that clock was always striking one."

"One!"

"Yes — half-past, you know; and I never knew which half-past it was."

"But it must strike half-past now, just the same!"

"It does." There was the triumphant ring of the conqueror in Aunt Hannah's voice. "But now it strikes half-past *on the hour*, and the clock in the hall tells me *then* what time it is, so I don't care."

For one more brief minute Billy stared, before a sudden light of understanding illumined her face. Then her laugh rang out gleefully.

"Oh, Aunt Hannah, Aunt Hannah," she gurgled. "If Bertram wouldn't call you the limit — making a clock strike eleven so you'll know it's half-past ten!"

Aunt Hannah colored a little, but she stood her ground.

"Well, there's only half an hour, anyway, now, that I don't know what time it is," she maintained, "for one or the other of those clocks strikes the hour every thirty minutes. Even during those

never-ending three ones that strike one after the other in the middle of the night, I can tell now, for the hall clock has a different sound for the half-hours, you know, so I can tell whether it's one or a half-past."

"Of course," chuckled Billy.

"I'm sure I think it's a splendid idea," chimed in Marie, valiantly; "and I'm going to write it to mother's Cousin Jane right away. She's an invalid, and she's always lying awake nights wondering what time it is. The doctor says actually he believes she'd get well if he could find some way of letting her know the time at night, so she'd get some sleep; for she simply can't go to sleep till she knows. She can't bear a light in the room, and it wakes her all up to turn an electric switch, or anything of that kind."

"Why doesn't she have one of those phosphorous things?" questioned Billy.

Marie laughed quietly.

"She did. I sent her one, — and she stood it just one night."

"Stood it!"

"Yes. She declared it gave her the creeps, and that she wouldn't have the spooky thing staring at her all night like that. So it's got to be something she can hear, and I'm going to tell her Mrs. Stetson's plan right away."

"Well, I'm sure I wish you would," cried that lady, with prompt interest; "and she'll like it, I'm sure. And tell her if she can hear a *town* clock strike, it's just the same, and even better; for there aren't any half-hours at all to think of there."

"I will — and I think it's lovely," declared Marie.

"Of course it's lovely," smiled Billy, rising; "but I fancy I'd better go and get ready to meet Mrs. Hartwell, or the 'lovely' thing will be telling me that it's half-past eleven!" And she tripped laughingly from the room.

Promptly at the appointed time John with Peggy drew up before the door, and Billy, muffled in furs, stepped into the car, which, with its protecting top and sides and glass wind-shield, was in its winter dress.

"Yes'm, 'tis a little chilly, Miss," said John, in answer to her greeting, as he tucked the heavy robes about her.

"Oh, well, I shall be very comfortable, I'm sure," smiled Billy. "Just don't drive too rapidly, specially coming home. I shall have to get a limousine, I think, when my ship comes in, John."

John's grizzled old face twitched. So evident were the words that were not spoken that Billy asked laughingly:

"Well, John, what is it?"

John reddened furiously.

"Nothing, Miss. I was only thinkin' that if you didn't 'tend ter haulin' in so many other folks's ships, yours might get in sooner."

"Why, John! Nonsense! I — I love to haul in other folks's ships," laughed the girl, embarrassedly.

"Yes, Miss; I know you do," grunted John.

Billy colored.

"No, no — that is, I mean — I don't do it — very much," she stammered.

John did not answer apparently; but Billy was sure she caught a low-muttered, indignant "much!" as he snapped the door shut and took his place at the wheel.

To herself she laughed softly. She thought she possessed the secret now of some of John's disapproving glances toward her humble guests of the summer before.

CHAPTER XII

SISTER KATE

At the station Mrs. Hartwell's train was found to be gratifyingly on time; and in due course Billy was extending a cordial welcome to a tall, handsome woman who carried herself with an unmistakable air of assured competence. Accompanying her was a little girl with big blue eyes and yellow curls.

"I am very glad to see you both," smiled Billy, holding out a friendly hand to Mrs. Hartwell, and stooping to kiss the round cheek of the little girl.

"Thank you, you are very kind," murmured the lady; "but — are you alone, Billy? Where are the boys?"

"Uncle William is out of town, and Cyril is rushed to death and sent his excuses. Bertram did mean to come, but he telephoned this morning that he couldn't, after all. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to make the best of just me," condoled Billy. "They'll be out to the house this

evening, of course — all but Uncle William. He doesn't return until to-morrow."

"Oh, doesn't he?" murmured the lady, reaching for her daughter's hand.

Billy looked down with a smile.

"And this is little Kate, I suppose," she said, "whom I haven't seen for such a long, long time. Let me see, you are how old now?"

"I'm eight. I've been eight six weeks."

Billy's eyes twinkled.

"And you don't remember me, I suppose."

The little girl shook her head.

"No; but I know who you are," she added, with shy eagerness. "You're going to be my Aunt Billy, and you're going to marry my Uncle William — I mean, my Uncle Bertram."

Billy's face changed color. Mrs. Hartwell gave a despairing gesture.

"Kate, my dear, I told you to be sure and remember that it was your Uncle Bertram now. You see," she added in a discouraged aside to Billy, "she can't seem to forget the first one. But then, what can you expect?" laughed Mrs. Hartwell, a little disagreeably. "Such abrupt changes from one brother to another are somewhat disconcerting, you know."

Billy bit her lip. For a moment she said nothing, then, a little constrainedly, she rejoined:

"Perhaps. Still — let us hope we have the right one, now."

Mrs. Hartwell raised her eyebrows.

"Well, my dear, I'm not so confident of that. *My* choice has been and always will be—William."

Billy bit her lip again. This time her brown eyes flashed a little.

"Is that so? But you see, after all, *you* aren't making the — the choice." Billy spoke lightly, gayly; and she ended with a bright little laugh, as if to hide any intended impertinence.

It was Mrs. Hartwell's turn to bite her lip — and she did it.

"So it seems," she rejoined frigidly, after the briefest of pauses.

It was not until they were on their way to Corey Hill some time later that Mrs. Hartwell turned with the question:

"Cyril is to be married in church, I suppose?"

"No. They both preferred a home wedding."

"Oh, what a pity! Church weddings are so attractive!"

"To those who like them," amended Billy in spite of herself.

"To every one, I think," corrected Mrs. Hartwell, positively.

Billy laughed. She was beginning to discern

that it did not do much harm — nor much good — to disagree with her guest.

"It's in the evening, then, of course?" pursued Mrs. Hartwell.

"No; at noon."

"Oh, how could you let them?"

"But they preferred it, Mrs. Hartwell."

"What if they did?" retorted the lady, sharply. "Can't you do as you please in your own home? Evening weddings are so much prettier! We can't change now, of course, with the guests all invited. That is, I suppose you do have guests!" Mrs. Hartwell's voice was aggrievedly despairing.

"Oh, yes," smiled Billy, demurely. "We have guests invited — and I'm afraid we can't change the time."

"No, of course not; but it's too bad. I conclude there are announcements only, as I got no cards."

"Announcements only," bowed Billy.

"I wish Cyril had consulted *me*, a little, about this affair."

Billy did not answer. She could not trust herself to speak just then. Cyril's words of two days before were in her ears: "Yes, and it will give Big Kate time to try to make your breakfast supper, and your roses pinks — or sunflowers."

In a moment Mrs. Hartwell spoke again.

"Of course a noon wedding is quite pretty if you darken the rooms and have lights — you're going to do that, I suppose?"

Billy shook her head slowly.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Hartwell. That isn't the plan, now."

"Not darken the rooms!" exclaimed Mrs. Hartwell. "Why, it won't —" She stopped suddenly, and fell back in her seat. The look of annoyed disappointment gave way to one of confident relief. "But then, *that can* be changed," she finished serenely.

Billy opened her lips, but she shut them without speaking. After a minute she opened them again.

"You might consult — Cyril — about that," she said in a quiet voice.

"Yes, I will," nodded Mrs. Hartwell, brightly. She was looking pleased and happy again. "I love weddings. Don't you? You can *do* so much with them!"

"Can you?" laughed Billy, irrepressibly.

"Yes. Cyril is happy, of course. Still, I can't imagine *him* in love with any woman."

"I think Marie can."

"I suppose so. I don't seem to remember her much; still, I think I saw her once or twice when I was on last June. Music teacher, wasn't she?"

"Yes. She is a very sweet girl."

"Hm-m; I suppose so. Still, I think 'twould have been better if Cyril could have selected some one that *wasn't* musical — say a more domestic wife. He's so terribly unpractical himself about household matters."

Billy gave a ringing laugh and stood up. The car had come to a stop before her own door.

"Do you? Just you wait till you see Marie's trousseau of — egg-beaters and cake tins," she chuckled.

Mrs. Hartwell looked blank.

"Whatever in the world do you mean, Billy?" she demanded fretfully, as she followed her hostess from the car. "I declare! aren't you ever going to grow beyond making those absurd remarks of yours?"

"Maybe — sometime," laughed Billy, as she took little Kate's hand and led the way up the steps.

Luncheon in the cozy dining-room at Hillside that day was not entirely a success. At least there were not present exactly the harmony and tranquillity that are conceded to be the best sauce for one's food. The wedding, of course, was the all-absorbing topic of conversation; and Billy, between Aunt Hannah's attempts to be polite, Marie's to be sweet-tempered, Mrs. Hartwell's to be dictatorial, and her own to be pacifying

as well as firm, had a hard time of it. If it had not been for two or three diversions created by little Kate, the meal would have been, indeed, a dismal failure.

But little Kate — most of the time the personification of proper little-girlhood — had a disconcerting faculty of occasionally dropping a word here, or a question there, with startling effect. As, for instance, when she asked Billy "Who's going to boss your wedding?" and again when she calmly informed her mother that when *she* was married she was not going to have any wedding at all to bother with, anyhow. She was going to elope, and she should choose somebody's chauffeur, because he'd know how to go the farthest and fastest so her mother couldn't catch up with her and tell her how she ought to have done it.

After luncheon Aunt Hannah went up-stairs for rest and recuperation. Marie took little Kate and went for a brisk walk — for the same purpose. This left Billy alone with her guest.

"Perhaps you would like a nap, too, Mrs. Hartwell," suggested Billy, as they passed into the living-room. There was a curious note of almost hopefulness in her voice.

Mrs. Hartwell scorned naps, and she said so very emphatically. She said something else, too.

"Billy, why do you always call me 'Mrs. Hart-

well ' in that stiff, formal fashion? You used to call me ' Aunt Kate.' "

" But I was very young then." Billy's voice was troubled. Billy had been trying so hard for the last two hours to be the graciously cordial hostess to this woman — Bertram's sister.

" Very true. Then why not ' Kate ' now? "

Billy hesitated. She was wondering why it seemed so hard to call Mrs. Hartwell " Kate."

" Of course," resumed the lady, " when you're Bertram's wife and my sister — "

" Why, of course," cried Billy, in a sudden flood of understanding. Curiously enough, she had never before thought of Mrs. Hartwell as *her* sister. " I shall be glad to call you ' Kate ' — if you like."

" Thank you. I shall like it very much, Billy," nodded the other cordially. " Indeed, my dear, I'm very fond of you, and I was delighted to hear you were to be my sister. If only — it could have stayed William instead of Bertram."

" But it couldn't," smiled Billy. " It wasn't William — that I loved."

" But *Bertram!* — it's so absurd: "

" Absurd! " The smile was gone now.

" Yes. Forgive me, Billy, but I was about as much surprised to hear of Bertram's engagement as I was of Cyril's."

Billy grew a little white.

"But Bertram was never an avowed — woman-hater, like Cyril, was he?"

"'Woman-hater' — dear me, no! He was a woman-lover, always. As if his eternal 'Face of a Girl' didn't prove that! Bertram has always loved women — to paint. But as for his ever taking them seriously — why, Billy, what's the matter?"

Billy had risen suddenly.

"If you'll excuse me, please, just a few minutes," Billy said very quietly. "I want to speak to Rosa in the kitchen. I'll be back — soon."

In the kitchen Billy spoke to Rosa — she wondered afterwards what she said. Certainly she did not stay in the kitchen long enough to say much. In her own room a minute later, with the door fast closed, she took from her table the photograph of Bertram and held it in her two hands, talking to it softly, but a little wildly.

"I didn't listen! I didn't stay! Do you hear? I came to you. She shall not say anything that will make trouble between you and me. I've suffered enough through her already! And she doesn't *know* — she didn't know before, and she doesn't now. She's only imagining. I will not — not — *not* believe that you love me — just to

paint. No matter what they say — all of them! I *will not!*"

Billy put the photograph back on the table then, and went down-stairs to her guest. She smiled brightly, though her face was a little pale.

"I wondered if perhaps you wouldn't like some music," she said pleasantly, going straight to the piano.

"Indeed I would!" agreed Mrs. Hartwell.

Billy sat down then and played — played as Mrs. Hartwell had never heard her play before.

"Why, Billy, you amaze me," she cried, when the pianist stopped and whirled about. "I had no idea you could play like that!"

Billy smiled enigmatically. Billy was thinking that Mrs. Hartwell would, indeed, have been surprised if she had known that in that playing were herself, the ride home, the luncheon, Bertram, and the girl — whom Bertram *did not love only to paint!*

CHAPTER XIII

CYRIL AND A WEDDING

THE twelfth was a beautiful day. Clear, frosty air set the blood to tingling and the eyes to sparkling, even if it were not your wedding day; while if it were —

It *was* Marie Hawthorn's wedding day, and certainly her eyes sparkled and her blood tingled as she threw open the window of her room and breathed long and deep of the fresh morning air before going down to breakfast.

"They say 'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on,'" she whispered softly to an English sparrow that cocked his eye at her from a neighboring tree branch. "As if a bride wouldn't be happy, sun or no sun," she scoffed tenderly, as she turned to go down-stairs.

As it happens, however, tingling blood and sparkling eyes are a matter of more than weather, or even weddings, as was proved a little later when the telephone bell rang.

Kate answered the ring.

"Hullo, is that you, Kate?" called a despairing voice.

"Yes. Good morning, Bertram. Isn't this a fine day for the wedding?"

"Fine! Oh, yes, I suppose so, though I must confess I haven't noticed it — and you wouldn't, if you had a lunatic on your hands."

"A lunatic!"

"Yes. Maybe you have, though. Is Marie rampaging around the house like a wild creature, and asking ten questions and making twenty threats to the minute?"

"Certainly not! Don't be absurd, Bertram. What do you mean?"

"See here, Kate, that show comes off at twelve sharp, doesn't it?"

"Show, indeed!" retorted Kate, indignantly. "The *wedding* is at noon sharp — as the best man should know very well."

"All right; then tell Billy, please, to see that it is sharp, or I won't answer for the consequences."

"What do you mean? What is the matter?"

"Cyril. He's broken loose at last. I've been expecting it all along. I've simply marvelled at the meekness with which he has submitted himself to be tied up with white ribbons and topped with roses."

"Nonsense, Bertram!"

"Well, it amounts to that. Anyhow, he thinks it does, and he's wild. I wish you could have heard the thunderous performance on his piano with which he woke me up this morning. Billy says he plays everything — his past, present, and future. All is, if he was playing his future this morning, I pity the girl who's got to live it with him."

"Bertram!"

Bertram chuckled remorselessly.

"Well, I do. But I'll warrant he wasn't playing his future this morning. He was playing his present — the wedding. You see, he's just waked up to the fact that it'll be a perfect orgy of women and other confusion, and he doesn't like it. All the samee, I've had to assure him just fourteen times this morning that the ring, the license, the carriage, the minister's fee, and my sanity are all O. K. When he isn't asking questions he's making threats to snake the parson up there an hour ahead of time and be off with Marie before a soul comes."

"What an absurd idea!"

"Cyril doesn't think so. Indeed, Kate, I've had a hard struggle to convince him that the guests wouldn't think it the most delightful experience of their lives if they should come and find the ceremony over with and the bride gone."

"Well, you remind Cyril, please, that there are other people besides himself concerned in this wedding," observed Kate, icily.

"I have," purred Bertram, "and he says all right, let them have it, then. He's gone now to look up proxy marriages, I believe."

"Proxy marriages, indeed! Come, come, Bertram, I've got something to do this morning besides to stand here listening to your nonsense. See that you and Cyril get here on time — that's all!" And she hung up the receiver with an impatient jerk.

She turned to confront the startled eyes of the bride elect.

"What is it? Is anything wrong — with Cyril?" faltered Marie.

Kate laughed and raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Nothing but a little stage fright, my dear."

"Stage fright!"

"Yes. Bertram says he's trying to find some one to play his rôle, I believe, in the ceremony."

"*Mrs. Hartwell!*"

At the look of dismayed terror that came into Marie's face, Mrs. Hartwell laughed reassuringly.

"There, there, dear child, don't look so horror-stricken. There probably never was a man yet who wouldn't have fled from the wedding part of his marriage if he could; and you know how

Cyril hates fuss and feathers. The wonder to me is that he's stood it as long as he has. I thought I saw it coming, last night at the rehearsal — and now I know I did."

Marie still looked distressed.

"But he never said — I thought — " She stopped helplessly.

"Of course he didn't, child. He never said anything but that he loved you, and he never thought anything but that you were going to be his. Men never do — till the wedding day. Then they never think of anything but a place to run," she finished laughingly, as she began to arrange on a stand the quantity of little white boxes waiting for her.

"But if he'd told me — in time, I wouldn't have had a thing — but the minister," faltered Marie.

"And when you think so much of a pretty wedding, too? Nonsense! It isn't good for a man, to give up to his whims like that!"

Marie's cheeks grew a deeper pink. Her nostrils dilated a little.

"It wouldn't be a 'whim,' Mrs. Hartwell, and I should be *glad* to give up," she said with decision.

Mrs. Hartwell laughed again, her amused eyes on Marie's face.

"Dear me, child! don't you know that if men

had their way, they'd — well, if men married men there'd never be such a thing in the world as a shower bouquet or a piece of wedding cake!"

There was no reply. A little precipitately Marie turned and hurried away. A moment later she was laying a restraining hand on Billy, who was filling tall vases with superb long-stemmed roses in the kitchen.

"Billy, please," she panted, "couldn't we do without those? Couldn't we send them to some — some hospital? — and the wedding cake, too, and —"

"The wedding cake — to some *hospital!*"

"No, of course not — to the hospital. It would make them sick to eat it, wouldn't it?" That there was no shadow of a smile on Marie's face showed how desperate, indeed, was her state of mind. "I only meant that I didn't want them myself, nor the shower bouquet, nor the rooms darkened, nor little Kate as the flower girl — and would you mind very much if I asked you not to be my maid of honor?"

"*Marie!*"

Marie covered her face with her hands then and began to sob brokenly; so there was nothing for Billy to do but to take her into her arms with soothing little murmurs and pettings. By degrees, then, the whole story came out.

Billy almost laughed — but she almost cried, too. Then she said:

"Dearie, I don't believe Cyril feels or acts half so bad as Bertram and Kate make out, and, anyhow, if he did, it's too late now to — to send the wedding cake to the hospital, or make any other of the little changes you suggest." Billy's lips puckered into a half-smile, but her eyes were grave. "Besides, there are your music pupils trimming the living-room this minute with evergreen, there's little Kate making her flower-girl wreath, and Mrs. Hartwell stacking cake boxes in the hall, to say nothing of Rosa gloating over the best china in the dining-room, and Aunt Hannah putting purple bows into the new lace cap she's counting on wearing. Only think how disappointed they'd all be if I should say: 'Never mind — stop that. Marie's just going to have a minister. No fuss, no feathers!' Why, dearie, even the roses are hanging their heads for grief," she went on mistily, lifting with gentle fingers one of the full-petalled pink beauties near her. "Besides, there's your — guests."

"Oh, of course, I knew I couldn't — really," sighed Marie, as she turned to go up-stairs, all the light and joy gone from her face.

Billy, once assured that Marie was out of hearing, ran to the telephone.

Bertram answered.

"Bertram, tell Cyril I want to speak to him, please."

"All right, dear, but go easy. Better strike up your tuning fork to find his pitch to-day. You'll discover it's a high one, all right."

A moment later Cyril's tersely nervous "Good morning, Billy," came across the line.

Billy drew in her breath and cast a hurriedly apprehensive glance over her shoulder to make sure Marie was not near.

"Cyril," she called in a low voice, "if you care a shred for Marie, for heaven's sake call her up and tell her that you dote on pink roses, and pink ribbons, and pink breakfasts - - and pink wedding cake!"

"But I don't."

"Oh, yes, you do — to-day! You would — if you could see Marie now."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, only she overheard part of Bertram's nonsensical talk with Kate a little while ago, and she's ready to cast the last ravelling of white satin and conventionality behind her, and go with you to the justice of the peace."

"Sensible girl!"

"Yes, but she can't, you know, with fifty guests coming to the wedding, and twice as many

more to the reception. Honestly, Cyril, she's broken-hearted. You must do something. She's — coming!" And the receiver clicked sharply into place.

Five minutes later Marie was called to the telephone. Dejectedly, wistful-eyed, she went. Just what were the words that hummed across the wire into the pink little ear of the bride-to-be, Billy never knew; but a Marie that was anything but wistful-eyed and dejected left the telephone a little later, and was heard very soon in the room above trilling merry snatches of a little song. Contentedly, then, Billy went back to her roses.

It was a pretty wedding, a very pretty wedding. Every one said that. The pink and green of the decorations, the soft lights (Kate had had her way about darkening the rooms), the pretty frocks and smiling faces of the guests all helped. Then there were the dainty flower girl, little Kate, the charming maid of honor, Billy, the stalwart, handsome best man, Bertram, to say nothing of the delicately beautiful bride, who looked like some fairy visitor from another world in the floating shimmer of her gossamer silk and tulle. There was, too, not quite unnoticed, the bridegroom; tall, of distinguished bearing, and with features that were clear cut and — to-day — rather pale.

Then came the reception — the "women and

confusion" of Cyril's fears — followed by the going away of the bride and groom with its merry warfare of confetti and old shoes.

At four o'clock, however, with only William and Bertram remaining for guests, something like quiet descended at last on the little house.

"Well, it's over," sighed Billy, dropping exhaustedly into a big chair in the living-room.

"And *well* over," supplemented Aunt Hannah, covering her white shawl with a warmer blue one.

"Yes, I think it was," nodded Kate. "It was really a very pretty wedding."

"With your help, Kate — eh?" teased William.

"Well, I flatter myself I did do some good," bridled Kate, as she turned to help little Kate take the flower wreath from her head.

"Even if you did hurry into my room and scare me into conniption fits telling me I'd be late," laughed Billy.

Kate tossed her head.

"Well, how was I to know that Aunt Hannah's clock only meant half-past eleven when it struck twelve?" she retorted.

Everybody laughed.

"Oh, well, it was a pretty wedding," declared William, with a long sigh.

"It'll do — for an understudy," said Bertram softly, for Billy's ears alone.

Only the added color and the swift glance showed that Billy heard, for when she spoke she said:

"And didn't Cyril behave beautifully? 'Most every time I looked at him he was talking to some woman."

"Oh, no, he wasn't — begging your pardon, my dear," objected Bertram. "I watched him, too, even more closely than you did, and it was always the *woman* who was talking to *Cyril!*"

Billy laughed.

"Well, anyhow," she maintained, "he listened. He didn't run away."

"As if a bridegroom could!" cried Kate.

"I'm going to," avowed Bertram, his nose in the air.

"Pooh!" scoffed Kate. Then she added eagerly: "You must be married in church, Billy, and in the evening."

Bertram's nose came suddenly out of the air. His eyes met Kate's squarely.

"Billy hasn't decided yet how *she* does want to be married," he said with unnecessary emphasis.

Billy laughed and interposed a quick change of subject.

"I think people had a pretty good time, too, for a wedding, don't you?" she asked. "I was sorry Mary Jane couldn't be here — 'twould have

been such a good chance for him to meet our friends."

"As — *Mary Jane?*" asked Bertram, a little stiffly.

"Really, my dear," murmured Aunt Hannah, "I think it *would* be more respectful to call him by his name."

"By the way, what is his name?" questioned William.

"That's what we don't know," laughed Billy.

"Well, you know the 'Arkwright,' don't you?" put in Bertram. Bertram, too, laughed, but it was a little forcedly. "I suppose if you knew his name was 'Methuselah,' you wouldn't call him that — yet, would you?"

Billy clapped her hands, and threw a merry glance at Aunt Hannah.

"There! we never thought of 'Methuselah,'" she gurgled gleefully. "Maybe it *is* 'Methuselah,' now — 'Methuselah John'! You see, he's told us to try to guess it," she explained, turning to William; "but, honestly, I don't believe, whatever it is, I'll ever think of him as anything but 'Mary Jane.'"

"Well, as far as I can judge, he has nobody but himself to thank for that, so he can't do any complaining," smiled William, as he rose to go. "Well, how about it, Bertram? I suppose you're

going to stay a while to comfort the lonely — eh, boy?"

"Of course he is — and so are you, too, Uncle William," spoke up Billy, with affectionate cordiality. "As if I'd let you go back to a forlorn dinner in that great house to-night! Indeed, no!"

William smiled, hesitated, and sat down.

"Well, of course —" he began.

"Yes, of course," finished Billy, quickly. "I'll telephone Pete that you'll stay here — both of you."

It was at this point that little Kate, who had been turning interested eyes from one brother to the other, interposed a clear, high-pitched question.

"Uncle William, didn't you *want* to marry my going-to-be-Aunt Billy?"

"Kate!" gasped her mother, "didn't I tell you — " Her voice trailed into an incoherent murmur of remonstrance.

Billy blushed. Bertram said a low word under his breath. Aunt Hannah's "Oh, my grief and conscience!" was almost a groan.

William laughed lightly.

"Well, my little lady," he suggested, "let us put it the other way and say that quite probably she didn't want to marry me."

"Does she want to marry Uncle Bertram?"

"Kate!" gasped Billy and Mrs. Hartwell together this time, fearful of what might be coming next.

"We'll hope so," nodded Uncle William, speaking in a cheerfully matter-of-fact voice, intended to discourage curiosity.

The little girl frowned and pondered. Her elders cast about in their minds for a speedy change of subject; but their somewhat scattered wits were not quick enough. It was little Kate who spoke next.

"Uncle William, would she have got Uncle Cyril if Aunt Marie hadn't nabbed him first?"

"Kate!" The word was a chorus of dismay this time.

Mrs. Hartwell struggled to her feet.

"Come, come, Kate, we must go up-stairs — to bed," she stammered.

The little girl drew back indignantly.

"To bed? Why, mama, I haven't had my supper yet!"

"What? Oh, sure enough — the lights! I forgot. Well, then, come up — to change your dress," finished Mrs. Hartwell, as with a despairing look and gesture she led her young daughter from the room.

CHAPTER XIV

M. J. MAKES ANOTHER MOVE

BILLY came down-stairs on the thirteenth of December to find everywhere the peculiar flatness that always follows a day which for weeks has been the focus of one's aims and thoughts and labor.

"It's just as if everything had stopped at Marie's wedding, and there wasn't anything more to do," she complained to Aunt Hannah at the breakfast table. "Everything seems so — queer!"

"It won't — long, dear," smiled Aunt Hannah, tranquilly, as she buttered her roll, "specially after Bertram comes back. How long does he stay in New York?"

"Only three days; but I'm just sure it's going to seem three weeks, now," sighed Billy. "But he simply had to go — else he wouldn't have gone."

"I've no doubt of it," observed Aunt Hannah. And at the meaning emphasis of her words,

Billy laughed a little. After a minute she said aggrievedly:

"I had supposed that I could at least have a sort of 'after the ball' celebration this morning picking up and straightening things around. But John and Rosa have done it all. There isn't so much as a rose leaf anywhere on the floor. Of course most of the flowers went to the hospital last night, anyway. As for Marie's room — it looks as spick-and-span as if it had never seen a scrap of ribbon or an inch of tulle."

"But — the wedding presents?"

"All carried down to the kitchen and half packed now, ready to go over to the new home. John says he'll take them over in Peggy this afternoon, after he takes Mrs. Hartwell's trunk to Uncle William's."

"Well, you can at least go over to the apartment and work," suggested Aunt Hannah, hopefully.

"Humph! Can I?" scoffed Billy. "As if I could — when Marie left strict orders that not one thing was to be touched till she got here. They arranged everything but the presents before the wedding, anyway; and Marie wants to fix those herself after she gets back. Mercy! Aunt Hannah, if I should so much as move a plate one inch in the china closet, Marie would know it —

and change it when she got home," laughed Billy, as she rose from the table. "No, I can't go to work over there."

"But there's your music, my dear. You said you were going to write some new songs after the wedding."

"I was," sighed Billy, walking to the window, and looking listlessly at the bare, brown world outside; "but I can't write songs — when there aren't any songs in my head to write."

"No, of course not; but they'll come, dear, in time. You're tired, now," soothed Aunt Hannah, as she turned to leave the room.

"It's the reaction, of course," murmured Aunt Hannah to herself, on the way up-stairs. "She's had the whole thing on her hands — dear child!"

A few minutes later, from the living-room, came a plaintive little minor melody. Billy was at the piano.

Kate and little Kate had, the night before, gone home with William. It had been a sudden decision, brought about by the realization that Bertram's trip to New York would leave William alone. Her trunk was to be carried there to-day, and she would leave for home from there, at the end of a two or three days' visit.

It began to snow at twelve o'clock. All the morning the sky had been gray and threatening;

and the threats took visible shape at noon in myriads of white snow feathers that filled the air to the blinding point, and turned the brown, bare world into a thing of fairylike beauty. Billy, however, with a rare frown upon her face, looked out upon it with disapproving eyes.

"I *was* going in town — and I believe I'll go now," she cried.

"Don't, dear, please don't," begged Aunt Hannah. "See, the flakes are smaller now, and the wind is coming up. We're in for a blizzard — I'm sure we are. And you know you have some cold, already."

"All right," sighed Billy. "Then it's me for the knitting work and the fire, I suppose," she finished, with a whimsicality that did not hide the wistful disappointment of her voice.

She was not knitting, however, she was sewing with Aunt Hannah when at four o'clock Rosa brought in the card.

Billy glanced at the name, then sprang to her feet with a glad little cry.

"It's Mary Jane!" she exclaimed, as Rosa disappeared. "Now wasn't he a dear to think to come to-day? You'll be down, won't you?"

Aunt Hannah smiled even while she frowned.

"Oh, Billy!" she remonstrated. "Yes, I'll come down, of course, a little later, and I'm glad

Mr. Arkwright came," she said with reproving emphasis.

Billy laughed and threw a mischievous glance over her shoulder.

"All right," she nodded. "I'll go and tell *Mr. Arkwright* you'll be down directly."

In the living-room Billy greeted her visitor with a frankly cordial hand.

"How did you know, Mr. Arkwright, that I was feeling specially restless and lonesome to-day?" she demanded.

A glad light sprang to the man's dark eyes.

"I didn't know it," he rejoined. "I only knew that I was specially restless and lonesome myself."

Arkwright's voice was not quite steady. The unmistakable friendliness in the girl's words and manner had sent a quick throb of joy to his heart. Her evident delight in his coming had filled him with rapture. He could not know that it was only the chill of the snowstorm that had given warmth to her handclasp, the dreariness of the day that had made her greeting so cordial, the loneliness of a maiden whose lover is away that had made his presence so welcome.

"Well, I'm glad you came, anyway," sighed Billy, contentedly; "though I suppose I ought to be sorry that you were lonesome — but I'm

afraid I'm not, for now you'll know just how I felt, so you won't mind if I'm a little wild and erratic. You see, the tension has snapped," she added laughingly, as she seated herself.

"Tension?"

"The wedding, you know. For so many weeks we've been seeing just December twelfth, that we'd apparently forgotten all about the thirteenth that came after it; so when I got up this morning I felt just as you do when the clock has stopped ticking. But it was a lovely wedding, Mr. Arkwright. I'm sorry you could not be here."

"Thank you; so am I — though usually, I will confess, I'm not much good at attending 'functions' and meeting strangers. As perhaps you've guessed, Miss Neilson, I'm not particularly a society chap."

"Of course you aren't! People who are doing things — real things — seldom are. But we aren't the society kind ourselves, you know — not the capital S kind. We like sociability, which is vastly different from liking Society. Oh, we have friends, to be sure, who dote on 'pink teas and purple pageants,' as Cyril calls them; and we even go ourselves sometimes. But if you had been here yesterday, Mr. Arkwright, you'd have met lots like yourself, men and women who are doing

things: singing, playing, painting, illustrating, writing. Why, we even had a poet, sir — only he didn't have long hair, so he didn't look the part a bit," she finished laughingly.

"Is long hair — necessary — for poets?" Arkwright's smile was quizzical.

"Dear me, no; not now. But it used to be, didn't it? And for painters, too. But now they look just like — folks."

Arkwright laughed.

"It isn't possible that you are sighing for the velvet coats and flowing ties of the past, is it, Miss Neilson?"

"I'm afraid it is," dimpled Billy. "I *love* velvet coats and flowing ties!"

"May singers wear them? I shall don them at once, anyhow, at a venture," declared the man, promptly.

Billy smiled and shook her head.

"I don't think you will. You all like your horrid fuzzy tweeds and worsteds too well!"

"You speak with feeling. One would almost suspect that you already had tried to bring about a reform — and failed. Perhaps Mr. Cyril, now, or Mr. Bertram —" Arkwright stopped with a whimsical smile.

Billy flushed a little. As it happened, she had, indeed, had a merry tilt with Bertram on that

very subject, and he had laughingly promised that his wedding present to her would be a velvet house coat for himself. It was on the point of Billy's tongue now to say this to Arkwright; but another glance at the provoking smile on his lips drove the words back in angry confusion. For the second time, in the presence of this man, Billy found herself unable to refer to her engagement to Bertram Henshaw — though this time she did not in the least doubt that Arkwright already knew of it.

With a little gesture of playful scorn she rose and went to the piano.

"Come, let us try some duets," she suggested. "That's lots nicer than quarrelling over velvet coats; and Aunt Hannah will be down presently to hear us sing."

Before she had ceased speaking, Arkwright was at her side with an exclamation of eager acquiescence.

It was after the second duet that Arkwright asked, a little diffidently.

"Have you written any new songs lately?"

"No."

"You're going to?"

"Perhaps — if I find one to write."

"You mean — you have no words?"

"Yes — and no. I have some words, both of

my own and other people's; but I haven't found in any one of them, yet — a melody."

Arkwright hesitated. His right hand went almost to his inner coat pocket — then fell back at his side. The next moment he picked up a sheet of music.

"Are you too tired to try this?" he asked.

A puzzled frown appeared on Billy's face.

"Why, no, but —"

"Well, children, I've come down to hear the music," announced Aunt Hannah, smilingly, from the doorway; "only — Billy, *will* you run up and get my pink shawl, too? This room *is* colder than I thought, and there's only the white one down here."

"Of course," cried Billy, rising at once. "You shall have a dozen shawls, if you like," she laughed, as she left the room.

What a cozy time it was — the hour that followed, after Billy returned with the pink shawl! Outside, the wind howled at the windows and flung the snow against the glass in sleety crashes. Inside, the man and the girl sang duets until they were tired; then, with Aunt Hannah, they feasted royally on the buttered toast, tea, and frosted cakes that Rosa served on a little table before the roaring fire. It was then that Arkwright talked

of himself, telling them something of his studies, and of the life he was living.

"After all, you see there's just this difference between my friends and yours," he said, at last. "Your friends *are* doing things. They've succeeded. Mine haven't, yet — they're only *trying*."

"But they will succeed," cried Billy.

"Some of them," amended the man.

"Not — all of them?" Billy looked a little troubled.

Arkwright shook his head slowly.

"No. They couldn't — all of them, you know. Some haven't the talent, some haven't the perseverance, and some haven't the money."

"But all that seems such a pity — when they've tried," grieved Billy.

"It is a pity, Miss Neilson. Disappointed hopes are always a pity, aren't they?"

"Y-yes," sighed the girl. "But — if there were only something one could do to — help!"

Arkwright's eyes grew deep with feeling, but his voice, when he spoke, was purposely light.

"I'm afraid that would be quite too big a contract for even your generosity, Miss Neilson — to mend all the broken hopes in the world," he prophesied.

"I have known great good to come from great

disappointments," remarked Aunt Hannah, a bit didactically.

"So have I," laughed Arkwright, still determined to drive the troubled shadow from the face he was watching so intently. "For instance: a fellow I know was feeling all cut up last Friday because he was just too late to get into Symphony Hall on the twenty-five-cent admission. Half an hour afterwards his disappointment was turned to joy — a friend who had an orchestra chair couldn't use his ticket that day, and so handed it over to him."

Billy turned interestedly.

"What are those twenty-five-cent tickets to the Symphony?"

"Then — you don't know?"

"Not exactly. I've heard of them, in a vague fashion."

"Then you've missed one of the sights of Boston if you haven't ever seen that long line of patient waiters at the door of Symphony Hall of a Friday morning."

"Morning! But the concert isn't till afternoon!"

"No, but the waiting is," retorted Arkwright. "You see, those admissions are limited — five hundred and five, I believe — and they're rush seats, at that. First come, first served; and if

you're too late you aren't served at all. So the first arrival comes bright and early. I've heard that he has been known to come at peep of day when there's a Paderewski or a Melba for a drawing card. But I've got my doubts of that. Anyhow, I never saw them there much before half-past eight. But many's the cold, stormy day I've seen those steps in front of the Hall packed for hours, and a long line reaching away up the avenue."

Billy's eyes widened.

"And they'll stand all that time and wait?"

"To be sure they will. You see, each pays twenty-five cents at the door, until the limit is reached, then the rest are turned away. Naturally they don't want to be turned away, so they try to get there early enough to be among the fortunate five hundred and five. Besides, the earlier you are, the better seat you are likely to get."

"But only think of *standing* all that time!"

"Oh, they bring camp chairs, sometimes, I've heard, and then there are the steps. You don't know what a really fine seat a stone step is — if you have a *big* enough bundle of newspapers to cushion it with! They bring their luncheons, too, with books, papers, and knitting work for fine days, I've been told — some of them. All the comforts of home, you see," smiled Arkwright.

"Why, how — how dreadful!" stammered Billy.

"Oh, but they don't think it's dreadful at all," corrected Arkwright, quickly. "For twenty-five cents they can hear all that you hear down in your orchestra chair, for which you've paid so high a premium."

"But who — who are they? Where do they come from? Who *would* go and stand hours like that to get a twenty-five-cent seat?" questioned Billy.

"Who are they? Anybody, everybody, from anywhere, everywhere; people who have the music hunger but not the money to satisfy it," he rejoined. "Students, teachers, a little milliner from South Boston, a little dressmaker from Chelsea, a housewife from Cambridge, a stranger from the uttermost parts of the earth; maybe a widow who used to sit down-stairs, or a professor who has seen better days. Really to know that line, you should see it for yourself, Miss Neilson," smiled Arkwright, as he reluctantly rose to go. "Some Friday, however, before you take your seat, just glance up at that packed top balcony and judge by the faces you see there whether their owners think they're getting their twenty-five-cents' worth, or not."

"I will," nodded Billy, with a smile; but the

smile came from her lips only, not her eyes: Billy was wishing, at that moment, that she owned the whole of Symphony Hall — to give away. But that was like Billy. When she was seven years old she had proposed to her Aunt Ella that they take all the thirty-five orphans from the Hampden Falls Orphan Asylum to live with them, so that little Sallie Cook and the other orphans might have ice cream every day, if they wanted it. Since then Billy had always been trying — in a way — to give ice cream to some one who wanted it.

Arkwright was almost at the door when he turned abruptly. His face was an abashed red. From his pocket he had taken a small folded paper.

"Do you suppose — in this — you might find — that melody?" he stammered in a low voice. The next moment he was gone, having left in Billy's fingers a paper upon which was written in a clear-cut, masculine hand six four-line stanzas.

Billy read them at once, hurriedly, then more carefully.

"Why, they're beautiful," she breathed, "just beautiful! Where did he get them, I wonder? It's a love song — and such a pretty one! I believe there *is* a melody in it," she exulted, pausing to hum a line or two. "There is — I know there

is; and I'll write it — for Bertram," she finished, crossing joyously to the piano.

Half-way down Corey Hill at that moment, Arkwright was buffeting the wind and snow. He, too, was thinking joyously of those stanzas — joyously, yet at the same time fearfully. Arkwright himself had written those lines — though not for Bertram.

CHAPTER XV

"MR. BILLY" AND "MISS MARY JANE"

On the fourteenth of December Billy came down-stairs alert, interested, and happy. She had received a dear letter from Bertram (mailed on the way to New York), the sun was shining, and her fingers were fairly tingling to put on paper the little melody that was now surging riotously through her brain. Emphatically, the restlessness of the day before was gone now. Once more Billy's "clock" had "begun to tick."

After breakfast Billy went straight to the telephone and called up Arkwright. Even one side of the conversation Aunt Hannah did not hear very clearly; but in five minutes a radiant-faced Billy danced into the room.

"Aunt Hannah, just listen! Only think — Mary Jane wrote the words himself, so of course I can use them!"

"Billy, dear, *can't* you say 'Mr. Arkwright'?" pleaded Aunt Hannah.

Billy laughed and gave the anxious-eyed little old lady an impulsive hug.

"Of course! I'll say 'His Majesty' if you like, dear," she chuckled. "But did you hear — did you realize? They're his own words, so there's no question of rights or permission, or anything. And he's coming up this afternoon to hear my melody, and to make a few little changes in the words, maybe. Oh, Aunt Hannah, you don't know how good it seems to get into my music again!"

"Yes, yes, dear, of course; but — " Aunt Hannah's sentence ended in a vaguely troubled pause.

Billy turned in surprise.

"Why, Aunt Hannah, aren't you glad? You *said* you'd be glad!"

"Yes, dear; and I am — very glad. It's only — if it doesn't take too much time — and if Bertram doesn't mind."

Billy flushed. She laughed a little bitterly.

"No, it won't take too much time, I fancy, and — so far as Bertram is concerned — if what Sister Kate says is true, Aunt Hannah, he'll be glad to have me occupy a little of my time with something besides himself."

"Fiddledeedee!" bristled Aunt Hannah. "What did she mean by that?"

Billy smiled ruefully.

"Well, probably I did need it. She said it

night before last just before she went home with Uncle William. She declared that I seemed to forget entirely that Bertram belonged to his Art first, before he belonged to me; and that it was exactly as she had supposed it would be — a perfect absurdity for Bertram to think of marrying anybody."

"Fiddlededee!" ejaculated the irate Aunt Hannah, even more sharply. "I hope you have too much good sense to mind what Kate says, Billy."

"Yes, I know," sighed the girl; "but of course I can see some things for myself, and I suppose I did make — a little fuss about his going to New York the other night. And I will own that I've had a real struggle with myself sometimes, lately, not to mind — his giving so much time to his portrait painting. And of course both of those are very reprehensible — in an artist's wife," she finished, a little tremulously.

"Humph! Well, I don't think I should worry about that," observed Aunt Hannah with grim positiveness.

"No, I don't mean to," smiled Billy, wistfully. "I only told you so you'd understand that it was just as well if I did have something to take up my mind — besides Bertram. And of course music would be the most natural thing."

"Yes, of course," agreed Aunt Hannah.

"And it seems actually almost providential that Mary — I mean Mr. Arkwright is here to help me, now that Cyril is gone," went on Billy, still a little wistfully.

"Yes, of course. He isn't like — a stranger," murmured Aunt Hannah. Aunt Hannah's voice sounded as if she were trying to convince herself — of something.

"No, indeed! He seems just like one of the family to me, almost as if he were really — your niece, Mary Jane," laughed Billy.

Aunt Hannah moved restlessly.

"Billy," she hazarded, "he knows, of course, of your engagement?"

"Why, of course he does, Aunt Hannah — everybody does!" Billy's eyes were plainly surprised.

"Yes, yes, of course — he must," subsided Aunt Hannah, confusedly, hoping that Billy would not divine the hidden reason behind her question. She was relieved when Billy's next words showed that she had not divined it.

"I told you, didn't I? He's coming up this afternoon. He can't get here till five, though; but he's so interested! He's about as crazy over the thing as I am. And it's going to be fine, Aunt Hannah, when it's done. You just wait and see!"

she finished gayly, as she tripped from the room.

Left to herself, Aunt Hannah drew a long breath.

"I'm glad she didn't suspect," she was thinking. "I believe she'd consider even the *question* disloyal to Bertram — dear child! And of course Mary" — Aunt Hannah corrected herself with cheeks aflame — "I mean Mr. Arkwright does — know."

It was just here, however, that Aunt Hannah was mistaken. Mr. Arkwright did not — know. He had not reached Boston when the engagement was announced. He knew none of Billy's friends in town save the Henshaw brothers. He had not heard from Calderwell since he came to Boston. The very evident intimacy of Billy with the Henshaw brothers he accepted as a matter of course, knowing the history of their acquaintance, and the fact that Billy was Mr. William Henshaw's namesake. As to Bertram being Billy's lover — that idea had long ago been killed at birth by Calderwell's emphatic assertion that the artist would never care for any girl — except to paint. Since coming to Boston, Arkwright had seen little of the two together. His work, his friends, and his general mode of life precluded that. Because of all this, therefore, Arkwright did not —

know; which was a pity — for Arkwright, and for some others.

Promptly at five o'clock that afternoon, Arkwright rang Billy's doorbell, and was admitted by Rosa to the living-room, where Billy was at the piano.

Billy sprang to her feet with a joyous word of greeting.

" I'm so glad you've come," she sighed happily. " I want you to hear the melody your pretty words have sung to me. Though, maybe, after all, you won't like it, you know," she finished with arch wistfulness.

" As if I could help liking it," smiled the man, trying to keep from his voice the ecstatic delight that the touch of her hand had brought him.

Billy shook her head and seated herself again at the piano.

" The words are lovely," she declared, sorting out two or three sheets of manuscript music from the quantity on the rack before her. " But there's one place — the rhythm, you know — if you could change it. There! — but listen. First I'm going to play it straight through to you." And she dropped her fingers to the keyboard. The next moment a tenderly sweet melody — with only a chord now and then for accompaniment — filled

Arkwright's soul with rapture. Then Billy began to sing, very softly, the words.

No wonder Arkwright's soul was filled with rapture. They were his words, wrung straight from his heart; and they were being sung by the girl for whom they were written. They were being sung with feeling, too — so evident a feeling that the man's pulse quickened, and his eyes flashed a sudden fire. Arkwright could not know, of course, that Billy, in her own mind, was singing that song — to Bertram Henshaw.

The fire was still in Arkwright's eyes when the song was ended; but Billy very plainly did not see it. With a frowning sigh and a murmured "There!" she began to talk of "rhythm" and "accent" and "cadence"; and to point out with anxious care why three syllables instead of two were needed at the end of a certain line. From this she passed eagerly to the accompaniment, and Arkwright at once found himself lost in a maze of "minor thirds" and "diminished sevenths," until he was forced to turn from the singer to the song. Still, watching her a little later, he noticed her absorbed face and eager enthusiasm, her earnest pursuance of an elusive harmony, and he wondered: did she, or did she not sing that song with feeling a little while before?

Arkwright had not settled this question to his

own satisfaction when Aunt Hannah came in at half-past five, and he was conscious of a vague disappointment as he rose to greet her. Billy, however, turned an untroubled face to the newcomer.

" We're doing finely, Aunt Hannah," she cried. Then, suddenly, she flung a laughing question to the man. " How about it, sir? Are we going to put on the title-page: ' Words by Mary Jane Arkwright ' — or will you unveil the mystery for us now? "

" Have you guessed it? " he bantered.

" No — unless it's ' Methuselah John.' We did think of that the other day."

" Wrong again! " he laughed.

" Then it'll have to be ' Mary Jane,' " retorted Billy, with calm naughtiness, refusing to meet Aunt Hannah's beseechingly reproving eyes. Then suddenly she chuckled. " It would be a combination, wouldn't it? ' Words by Mary Jane Arkwright. Music by Billy Neilson '! We'd have sighing swains writing to ' Dear Miss Arkwright,' telling how touching were *her* words; and lovelorn damsels thanking *Mr.* Neilson for *his* soul-inspiring music! "

" Billy, my dear! " remonstrated Aunt Hannah, faintly.

" Yes, yes, I know; that was bad — and I

won't again, truly," promised Billy. But her eyes danced, and the next moment she had whirled about on the piano stool and dashed into a Chopin waltz. The room itself, then, seemed to be full of the twinkling feet of elves.

CHAPTER XVI

A GIRL AND A BIT OF LOWESTOFT

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast the next morning, Billy was summoned to the telephone.

"Oh, good morning, Uncle William," she called, in answer to the masculine voice that replied to her "Hullo."

"Billy, are you very busy this morning?"

"No, indeed — not if you want me."

"Well, I do, my dear." Uncle William's voice was troubled. "I want you to go with me, if you can, to see a Mrs. Greggory. She's got a teapot I want. It's a genuine Lowestoft, Harlow says. Will you go?"

"Of course I will! What time?"

"Eleven if you can, at Park Street. She's at the West End. I don't dare to put it off for fear I'll lose it. Harlow says others will have to know of it, of course. You see, she's just made up her mind to sell it, and asked him to find a customer. I wouldn't trouble you, but he says they're peculiar — the daughter, especially — and

may need some careful handling. That's why I wanted you — though I wanted you to see the teapot, too, — it'll be yours some day, you know."

Billy, all alone at her end of the line, blushed. That she was one day to be mistress of the Strata and all it contained was still anything but "common" to her.

"I'd love to see it, and I'll come gladly; but I'm afraid I won't be much help, Uncle William," she worried.

"I'll take the risk of that. You see, Harlow says that about half the time she isn't sure she wants to sell it, after all."

"Why, how funny! Well, I'll come. At eleven, you say, at Park Street?"

"Yes; and thank you, my dear. I tried to get Kate to go, too; but she wouldn't. By the way, I'm going to bring you home to luncheon. Kate leaves this afternoon, you know, and it's been so snowy she hasn't thought best to try to get over to the house. Maybe Aunt Hannah would come, too, for luncheon. Would she?"

"I'm afraid not," returned Billy, with a rueful laugh. "She's got *three* shawls on this morning, and you know that always means that she's felt a draft somewhere — poor dear. I'll tell her, though, and I'll see you at eleven," finished Billy, as she hung up the receiver.

Promptly at the appointed time Billy met Uncle William at Park Street, and together they set out for the West End street named on the paper in his pocket. But when the shabby house on the narrow little street was reached, the man looked about him with a troubled frown.

"I declare, Billy, I'm not sure but we'd better turn back," he fretted. "I didn't mean to take you to such a place as this."

Billy shivered a little; but after one glance at the man's disappointed face she lifted a determined chin.

"Nonsense, Uncle William! Of course you won't turn back. I don't mind — for myself; but only think of the people whose *homes* are here," she finished, just above her breath.

Mrs. Greggory was found to be living in two back rooms at the top of four flights of stairs, up which William Henshaw toiled with increasing weariness and dismay, punctuating each flight with a despairing: "Billy, really, I think we should turn back!"

But Billy would not turn back, and at last they found themselves in the presence of a white-haired, sweet-faced woman who said yes, she was Mrs. Greggory; yes, she was. Even as she uttered the words, however, she looked fearfully over her shoulders as if expecting to hear from

the hall behind them a voice denying her assertion.

Mrs. Greggory was a cripple. Her slender little body was poised on two once-costly crutches. Both the worn places on the crutches, and the skill with which the little woman swung herself about the room testified that the crippled condition was not a new one.

Billy's eyes were brimming with pity and dismay. Mechanically she had taken the chair toward which Mrs. Greggory had motioned her. She had tried not to seem to look about her; but there was not one detail of the bare little room, from its faded rug to the patched but spotless tablecloth, that was not stamped on her brain.

Mrs. Greggory had seated herself now, and William Henshaw had cleared his throat nervously. Billy did not know whether she herself were the more distressed or the more relieved to hear him stammer:

"We — er — I came from Harlow, Mrs. Greggory. He gave me to understand you had an — er — teapot that — er — " With his eyes on the cracked white crockery pitcher on the table, William Henshaw came to a helpless pause.

A curious expression, or rather, series of expressions crossed Mrs. Greggory's face. Terror, joy, dismay, and relief seemed, one after the other,

to fight for supremacy. Relief in the end conquered, though even yet there was a second hurriedly apprehensive glance toward the door before she spoke.

"The Lowestoft! Yes, I'm so glad! — that is, of course I must be glad. I'll get it." Her voice broke as she pulled herself from her chair. There was only despairing sorrow on her face now.

The man rose at once.

"But, madam, perhaps — don't let me — " he began stammeringly. "Of course — Billy!" he broke off in an entirely different voice. "Jove! What a beauty!"

Mrs. Greggory had thrown open the door of a small cupboard near the collector's chair, disclosing on one of the shelves a beautifully shaped teapot, creamy in tint, and exquisitely decorated in a rose design. Near it set a tray-like plate of the same ware and decoration.

"If you'll lift it down, please, yourself," motioned Mrs. Greggory. "I don't like to — with these," she explained, tapping the crutches at her side.

With fingers that were almost reverent in their appreciation, the collector reached for the teapot. His eyes sparkled.

"Billy, look, what a beauty! And it's a Lowes-

toft, too, the real thing — the genuine, true soft paste! And there's the tray — did you notice?" he exulted, turning back to the shelf. "You *don't* see that every day! They get separated, most generally, you know."

"These pieces have been in our family for generations," said Mrs. Greggory with an accent of pride. "You'll find them quite perfect, I think."

"Perfect! I should say they were," cried the man.

"They are, then — valuable?" Mrs. Greggory's voice shook.

"Indeed they are! But you must know that."

"I have been told so. Yet to me their chief value, of course, lies in their association. My mother and my grandmother owned that teapot, sir." Again her voice broke.

William Henshaw cleared his throat.

"But, madam, if you do not wish to sell —" He stopped abruptly. His longing eyes had gone back to the enticing bit of china.

Mrs. Greggory gave a low cry.

"But I do — that is, I must. Mr. Harlow says that it is valuable, and that it will bring in money; and we need — money." She threw a quick glance toward the hall door, though she did not pause in her remarks. "I can't do much

— at work that pays. I sew — " she nodded toward the machine by the window — " but with only one foot to make it go — You see, the other is — is inclined to shirk a little," she finished with a wistful whimsicality.

Billy turned away sharply. There was a lump in her throat and a smart in her eyes. She was conscious suddenly of a fierce anger against — she did not know what, exactly; but she fancied it was against the teapot, or against Uncle William for wanting the teapot, or for *not* wanting it — if he did not buy it.

" And so you see, I do very much wish to sell," Mrs. Greggory said then. " Perhaps you will tell me what it would be worth to you," she concluded tremulously.

The collector's eyes glowed. He picked up the teapot with careful rapture and examined it. Then he turned to the tray. After a moment he spoke.

" I have only one other in my collection as rare," he said. " I paid a hundred dollars for that. I shall be glad to give you the same for this, madam."

Mrs. Greggory started visibly.

" A hundred dollars? So much as that? " she cried almost joyously. " Why, nothing else that we've had has brought — Of course, if it's worth

that to you — " She paused suddenly. A quick step had sounded in the hall outside. The next moment the door flew open and a young woman, who looked to be about twenty-three or twenty-four years old, burst into the room.

" Mother, only think, I've — " She stopped, and drew back a little. Her startled eyes went from one face to another, then dropped to the Lowestoft teapot in the man's hands. Her expression changed at once. She shut the door quickly and hurried forward.

" Mother, what is it? Who are these people? " she asked sharply.

Billy lifted her chin the least bit. She was conscious of a feeling which she could not name: Billy was not used to being called " these people " in precisely that tone of voice. William Henshaw, too, raised his chin. He, also, was not in the habit of being referred to as " these people."

" My name is Henshaw, Miss — Greggory, I presume," he said quietly. " I was sent here by Mr. Harlow."

" About the teapot, my dear, you know," stammered Mrs. Greggory, wetting her lips with an air of hurried apology and conciliation. " This gentleman says he will be glad to buy it. Er — my daughter, Alice, Mr. Henshaw," she hastened on, in embarrassed introduction; " and Miss — "

"Neilson," supplied the man, as she looked at Billy, and hesitated.

A swift red stained Alice Greggory's face. With barely an acknowledgment of the introductions she turned to her mother.

"Yes, dear, but that won't be necessary now. As I started to tell you when I came in, I have two new pupils; and so" — turning to the man again "I thank you for your offer, but we have decided not to sell the teapot at present." As she finished her sentence she stepped one side as if to make room for the strangers to reach the door.

William Henshaw frowned angrily — that was the man; but his eyes — the collector's eyes — sought the teapot longingly. Before either the man or the collector could speak, however, Mrs. Greggory interposed quick words of remonstrance.

"But, Alice, my dear," she almost sobbed. "You didn't wait to let me tell you. Mr. Henshaw says it is worth a hundred dollars to him. He will give us — a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars!" echoed the girl, faintly.

It was plain to be seen that she was wavering. Billy, watching the little scene, with mingled emotions, saw the glance with which the girl swept the bare little room; and she knew that there was not a patch or darn or poverty spot in

sight, or out of sight, which that glance did not encompass.

Billy was wondering which she herself desired more — that Uncle William should buy the Lowestoft, or that he should not. She knew she wished Mrs. Greggory to have the hundred dollars. There was no doubt on that point. Then Uncle William spoke. His words carried the righteous indignation of the man who thinks he has been unjustly treated, and the final plea of the collector who sees a coveted treasure slipping from his grasp.

"I am very sorry, of course, if my offer has annoyed you," he said stiffly. "I certainly should not have made it had I not had Mrs. Greggory's assurance that she wished to sell the teapot."

Alice Greggory turned as if stung.

"*Wished to sell!*" She repeated the words with superb disdain. She was plainly very angry. Her blue-gray eyes gleamed with scorn, and her whole face was suffused with a red that had swept to the roots of her soft hair. "Do you think a woman *wishes* to sell a thing that she's treasured all her life, a thing that is perhaps the last visible reminder of the days when she was living — not merely existing?"

"Alice, Alice, my love!" protested the sweet-faced cripple, agitatedly.

"I can't help it," stormed the girl, hotly. "I know how much you think of that teapot that was grandmother's. I know what it cost you to make up your mind to sell it at all. And then to hear these people talk about your *wishing* to sell it! Perhaps they think, too, we *wish* to live in a place like this; that we *wish* to have rugs that are darned, and chairs that are broken, and garments that are patches instead of clothes!"

"Alice!" gasped Mrs. Greggory in dismayed horror.

With a little outward fling of her two hands Alice Greggory stepped back. Her face had grown white again.

"I beg your pardon, of course," she said in a voice that was bitterly quiet. "I should not have spoken so. You are very kind, Mr. Henshaw, but I do not think we care to sell the Lowestoft to-day."

Both words and manner were obviously a dismissal; and with a puzzled sigh William Henshaw picked up his hat. His face showed very clearly that he did not know what to do, or what to say; but it showed, too, as clearly, that he longed to do something, or say something. During the brief minute that he hesitated, however, Billy sprang forward.

"Mrs. Greggory, please, won't you let *me* buy

the teapot? And then — won't you keep it for me — here? I haven't the hundred dollars with me, but I'll send it right away. You will let me do it, won't you? "

It was an impulsive speech, and a foolish one, of course, from the standpoint of sense and logic and reasonableness; but it was one that might be expected, perhaps, from Billy.

Mrs. Greggory must have divined, in a way, the spirit that prompted it, for her eyes grew wet, and with a choking " Dear child! " she reached out and caught Billy's hand in both her own — even while she shook her head in denial.

Not so her daughter. Alice Greggory flushed scarlet. She drew herself proudly erect.

" Thank you," she said with crisp coldness; " but, distasteful as darns and patches are to us, we prefer them, infinitely, to — charity! "

" Oh, but, please, I didn't mean — you didn't understand," faltered Billy.

For answer Alice Greggory walked deliberately to the door and held it open.

" Oh, Alice, my dear," pleaded Mrs. Greggory again, feebly.

" Come, Billy! We'll bid you good morning, ladies," said William Henshaw then, decisively. And Billy, with a little wistful pat on Mrs. Greggory's clasped hands, went.

Once down the long four flights of stairs and out on the sidewalk, William Henshaw drew a long breath.

"Well, by Jove! Billy, the next time I take you curio hunting, it won't be to this place," he fumed.

"Wasn't it awful!" choked Billy.

"Awful! The girl was the most stubborn, unreasonable, vixenish little puss I ever saw. I didn't want her old Lowestoft if she didn't want to sell it! But to practically invite me there, and then treat me like that!" scolded the collector, his face growing red with anger. "Still, I was sorry for the poor little old lady. I wish, somehow, she could have that hundred dollars!" It was the man who said this, not the collector.

"So do I," rejoined Billy, dolefully. "But that girl was so — so queer!" she sighed, with a frown. Billy was puzzled. For the first time, perhaps, in her life, she knew what it was to have her proffered "ice cream" disdainfully refused.

CHAPTER XVII

ONLY A LOVE SONG, BUT —

KATE and little Kate left for the West on the afternoon of the fifteenth, and Bertram arrived from New York that evening. Notwithstanding the confusion of all this, Billy still had time to give some thought to her experience of the morning with Uncle William. The forlorn little room with its poverty-stricken furnishings and its crippled mistress was very vivid in Billy's memory. Equally vivid were the flashing eyes of Alice Greggory as she had opened the door at the last.

"For," as Billy explained to Bertram that evening, after she had told him the story of the morning's adventure, "you see, dear, I had never been really *turned out* of a house before!"

"I should think not," scowled her lover, indignantly; "and it's safe to say you never will again. The impertinence of it! But then, you won't see them any more, sweetheart, so we'll just forget it."

"Forget it! Why, Bertram, I couldn't! You couldn't, if you'd been there. Besides, of course I shall see them again!"

Bertram's jaw dropped.

"Why, Billy, you don't mean that Will, or you either, would try again for that trumpery teapot!"

"Of course not," flashed Billy, heatedly. "It isn't the teapot — it's that dear little Mrs. Greggory. Why, dearie, you don't know how poor they are! Everything in sight is so old and thin and worn it's enough to break your heart. The rug isn't anything but darns, nor the tablecloth, either — except patches. It's awful, Bertram!"

"I know, darling; but *you* don't expect to buy them new rugs and new tablecloths, do you?"

Billy gave one of her unexpected laughs.

"Mercy!" she chuckled. "Only picture Miss Alice's face if I *should* try to buy them rugs and tablecloths! No, dear," she went on more seriously, "I sha'n't do that, of course — though I'd like to; but I shall try to see Mrs. Greggory again, if it's nothing more than a rose or a book or a new magazine that I can take to her."

"Or a smile — which I fancy will be the best gift of the lot," amended Bertram, fondly.

Billy dimpled and shook her head.

"Smiles — my smiles — are not so valuable,

I'm afraid — except to you, perhaps," she laughed.

"Self-evident facts need no proving," retorted Bertram. "Well, and what else has happened in all these ages I've been away?"

Billy brought her hands together with a sudden cry.

"Oh, and I haven't told you!" she exclaimed. "I'm writing a new song — a love song. Mary Jane wrote the words. They're beautiful."

Bertram stiffened.

"Indeed! And is — Mary Jane a poet, with all the rest?" he asked, with affected lightness.

"Oh, no, of course not," smiled Billy; "but these words *are* pretty. And they just sang themselves into the dearest little melody right away. So I'm writing the music for them."

"Lucky Mary Jane!" murmured Bertram, still with a lightness that he hoped would pass for indifference. (Bertram was ashamed of himself, but deep within him was a growing consciousness that he knew the meaning of the vague irritation that he always felt at the mere mention of Arkwright's name.) "And will the title-page say, 'Words by Mary Jane Arkwright'?" he finished.

"That's what I asked him," laughed Billy.

"I even suggested 'Methuselah John' for a change. Oh, but, dearie," she broke off with shy eagerness, "I just want you to hear a little of what I've done with it. You see, really, all the time, I suspect, I've been singing it — to you," she confessed with an endearing blush, as she sprang lightly to her feet and hurried to the piano.

It was a bad ten minutes that Bertram Henshaw spent then. How he could love a song and hate it at the same time he did not understand; but he knew that he was doing exactly that. To hear Billy carol "Sweetheart, my sweetheart!" with that joyous tenderness was bliss unspeakable — until he remembered that Arkwright wrote the "Sweetheart, my sweetheart!" then it was — (Even in his thoughts Bertram bit the word off short. He was not a swearing man.) When he looked at Billy now at the piano, and thought of her singing — as she said she had sung — that song to him all through the last three days, his heart glowed. But when he looked at her and thought of Arkwright, who had made possible that singing, his heart froze with terror.

From the very first it had been music that Bertram had feared. He could not forget that Billy herself had once told him that never would she love any man better than she loved her music;

that she was not going to marry. All this had been at the first — the very first. He had boldly scorned the idea then, and had said:

"So it's music — a cold, senseless thing of spidery marks on clean white paper — that is my only rival!"

He had said, too, that he was going to win. And he had won — but not until after long weeks of fearing, hoping, striving, and despairing — this last when Kate's blundering had nearly made her William's wife. Then, on that memorable day in September, Billy had walked straight into his arms; and he knew that he had, indeed, won. That is, he had supposed that he knew — until Arkwright came.

Very sharply now, as he listened to Billy's singing, Bertram told himself to be reasonable, to be sensible; that Billy did, indeed, love him. Was she not, according to her own dear assertion, singing that song to him? But it was Arkwright's song. He remembered that, too — and grew faint at the thought. True, he had won when his rival, music, had been a "cold, senseless thing of spidery marks" on paper; but would that winning stand when "music" had become a thing of flesh and blood — a man of undeniable charm, good looks, and winsomeness; a man whose thoughts, aims, and words were the personification of the thing

Billy, in the long ago, had declared she loved best of all — music?

Bertram shivered as with a sudden chill; then Billy rose from the piano.

"There!" she breathed, her face shyly radiant with the glory of the song. "Did you — like it?"

Bertram did his best; but, in his state of mind, the very radiance of her face was only an added torture, and his tongue stumbled over the words of praise and appreciation that he tried to say. He saw, then, the happy light in Billy's eyes change to troubled questioning and grieved disappointment; and he hated himself for a jealous brute. More earnestly than ever, now, he tried to force the ring of sincerity into his voice; but he knew that he had miserably failed when he heard her falter:

"Of course, dear, I — I haven't got it nearly perfected yet. It'll be much better, later."

"But it s fine, now, sweetheart — indeed it is," protested Bertram, hurriedly.

"Well, of course I'm glad — if you like it," murmured Billy; but the glow did not come back to her face.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUGARPLUMS

THOSE short December days after Bertram's return from New York were busy ones for everybody. Miss Winthrop was not in town to give sittings for her portrait, it is true; but her absence only afforded Bertram time and opportunity to attend to other work that had been more or less delayed and neglected. He was often at Hillside, however, and the lovers managed to snatch many an hour of quiet happiness from the rush and confusion of the Christmas preparations.

Bertram was assuring himself now that his jealous fears of Arkwright were groundless. Billy seldom mentioned the man, and, as the days passed, she spoke only once of his being at the house. The song, too, she said little of; and Bertram — though he was ashamed to own it to himself — breathed more freely.

The real facts of the case were that Billy had told Arkwright that she should have no time to give attention to the song until after Christmas; and her manner had so plainly shown him that

she considered himself synonymous with the song, that he had reluctantly taken the hint and kept away.

"I'll make her care for me sometime — for something besides a song," he told himself with fierce consolation — but Billy did not know this.

Aside from Bertram, Christmas filled all of Billy's thoughts these days. There were such a lot of things she wished to do.

"But, after all, they're only sugarplums, you know, that I'm giving, dear," she declared to Bertram one day, when he had remonstrated with with her for so taxing her time and strength. "I can't really do much."

"Much!" scoffed Bertram.

"But it isn't much, honestly — compared to what there is to do," argued Billy. "You see, dear, it's just this," she went on, her bright face sobering a little. "There are such a lot of people in the world who aren't really poor. That is, they have bread, and probably meat, to eat, and enough clothes to keep them warm. But when you've said that, you've said it all. Books, music, fun, and frosting on their cake they know nothing about — except to long for them."

"But there are the churches and the charities, and all those long-named Societies — I thought that was what they were for," declared Bertram,

still a little aggrievedly, his worried eyes on Billy's tired face.

"Oh, but the churches and charities don't frost cakes nor give sugarplums," smiled Billy. "And it's right that they shouldn't, too," she added quickly. "They have more than they can do now with the roast beef and coal and flannel petticoats that are really necessary."

"And so it's just frosting and sugarplums, is it — these books and magazines and concert tickets and lace collars for the crippled boy, the spinster lady, the little widow, and all the rest of those people who were here last summer?"

Billy turned in confused surprise.

"Why, Bertram, however in the world did you find out about all — that?"

"I didn't. I just guessed it — and it seems 'the boy guessed right the very first time,'" laughed Bertram, teasingly, but with a tender light in his eyes. "Oh, and I suppose you'll be sending a frosted cake to the Lowestoft lady, too, eh?"

Billy's chin rose to a defiant stubbornness.

"I'm going to try to — if I can find out what kind of frosting she likes."

"How about the Alice lady — or perhaps I should say, the Lady Alice?" smiled the man.

Billy relaxed visibly.

"Yes, I know," she sighed. "There is — the Lady Alice. But, anyhow, she can't call a Christmas present 'charity' — not if it's only a little bit of frosting!" Billy's chin came up again.

"And you're going to, really, dare to send her something?"

"Yes," avowed Billy. "I'm going down there one of these days, in the morning — "

"You're going down there! Billy — not alone?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"But, dearie, you mustn't. It was a horrid place, Will says."

"So it was horrid — to live in. It was everything that was cheap and mean and forlorn. But it was quiet and respectable. 'Tisn't as if I didn't know the way, Bertram; and I'm sure that where that poor crippled woman and daughter are safe, I shall be. Mrs. Greggory is a lady, Bertram, well-born and well-bred, I'm sure — and that's the pity of it, to have to live in a place like that! They have seen better days, I know. Those pitiful little worn crutches of hers were mahogany, I'm sure, Bertram, and they were silver mounted."

Bertram made a restless movement.

"I know, dear; but if you had some one with you! It wouldn't do for Will, of course, nor me —

under the circumstances. But there's Aunt Hannah — " He paused hopefully.

Billy chuckled.

" Bless your dear heart! Aunt Hannah would call for a dozen shawls in that place — if she had breath enough to call for any after she got to the top of those four flights! "

" Yes, I suppose so," rejoined Bertram, with an unwilling smile. " Still — well, you *can* take Rosa," he concluded decisively.

" How Miss Alice would like that — to catch me going ' slumming ' with my maid! " cried Billy, righteous indignation in her voice. " Honestly, Bertram, I think even gentle Mrs. Greggory wouldn't stand for that."

" Then leave Rosa outside in the hall," planned Bertram, promptly; and after a few more arguments, Billy finally agreed to this.

It was with Rosa, therefore, that she set out the next morning for the little room up four flights on the narrow West End street.

Leaving the maid on the top stair of the fourth flight, Billy tapped at Mrs. Greggory's door. To her joy Mrs. Greggory herself answered the knock.

" Oh! Why — why, good morning," murmured the lady, in evident embarrassment. " Won't you — come in? "

"Thank you. May I? — just a minute?" smiled Billy, brightly.

As she entered the room, Billy threw a hasty look about her. There was no one but themselves present. With a sigh of satisfaction, therefore, the girl took the chair Mrs. Greggory offered, and began to speak.

"I was down this way — that is, I came this way this morning," she began a little hastily; "and I wanted just to come up and tell you how sorry I was about — about that teapot the other day. We didn't want it, of course — if you didn't want us to have it."

A swift change crossed Mrs. Greggory's perturbed face.

"Oh, then you didn't come for it again — today," she said. "I'm so glad! I didn't want to refuse — *you*."

"Indeed I didn't come for it — and we sha'n't again. Don't worry about that, please."

Mrs. Greggory sighed.

"I'm afraid you thought me very rude and — and impossible the other day," she stammered. "And please let me take this opportunity right now to apologize for my daughter. She was overwrought and excited. She didn't know what she was saying or doing, I'm sure. She was ashamed, I think after you left."

Billy raised a quick hand of protest.

"Don't, please don't, Mrs. Greggory," she begged.

"But it was our fault that you came. We *asked* you to come — through Mr. Harlow," rejoined the other, hurriedly. "And Mr. Henshaw — was that his name? — was so kind in every way. I'm glad of this chance to tell you how much we really did appreciate it — and *your* offer, too, which we could not, of course, accept," she finished, the bright color flooding her delicate face.

Again Billy raised a protesting hand; but the little woman in the opposite chair hurried on. There was still more, evidently, that she wished to say.

"I hope Mr. Henshaw did not feel too disappointed — about the Lowestoft. We didn't want to let it go if we could help it; and we hope now to keep it."

"Of course," murmured Billy, sympathetically.

"My daughter knew, you see, how much I have always thought of it, and she was determined that I should not give it up. She said I should have that much left, anyway. You see — my daughter is very unreconciled, still, to things as they are; and no wonder, perhaps. They are so different — from what they were!" Her voice broke a little.

"Of course," said Billy again, and this time the words were tinged with impatient indignation. "If only there were something one could do to help!"

"Thank you, my dear, but there isn't — indeed there isn't," rejoined the other, quickly; and Billy, looking into the proudly lifted face, realized suddenly that daughter Alice had perhaps inherited some traits from mother. "We shall get along very well, I am sure. My daughter has still another pupil. She will be home soon to tell you herself, perhaps."

Billy rose with a haste so marked it was almost impolite, as she murmured:

"Will she? I'm afraid, though, that I sha'n't see her, after all, for I must go. And may I leave these, please?" she added, hurriedly unpinning the bunch of white carnations from her coat. "It seems a pity to let them wilt, when you can put them in water right here." Her studiously casual voice gave no hint that those particular pinks had been bought less than half an hour before of a Park Street florist so that Mrs. Greggory *might* put them in water — right there.

"Oh, oh, how lovely!" breathed Mrs. Greggory, her face deep in the feathery bed of sweetness. Before she could half say "Thank you," however, she found herself alone.

CHAPTER XIX

ALICE GREGGORY

CHRISTMAS came and went; and in a flurry of snow and sleet January arrived. The holidays over, matters and things seemed to settle down to the winter routine.

Miss Winthrop had prolonged her visit in Washington until after Christmas, but she had returned to Boston now — and with her she had brought a brand-new idea for her portrait; an idea that caused her to sweep aside with superb disdain all poses and costumes and sketches to date, and announce herself with disarming winsomeness as "all ready now to really begin!"

Bertram Henshaw was vexed, but helpless. Decidedly he wished to paint Miss Marguerite Winthrop's portrait; but to attempt to paint it when all matters were not to the lady's liking were worse than useless, unless he wished to hang this portrait in the gallery of failures along with Anderson's and Fullam's — and that was not the goal he had set for it. As to the sordid money part of the affair — the great J. G. Winthrop

himself had come to the artist, and in one terse sentence had doubled the original price and expressed himself as hopeful that Henshaw would put up with "the child's notions." It was the old financier's next sentence, however, that put the zest of real determination into Bertram, for because of it, the artist saw what this portrait was going to mean to the stern old man, and how dear was the original of it to a heart that was commonly reported "on the street" to be made of stone.

Obviously, then, indeed, there was nothing for Bertram Henshaw to do but to begin the new portrait. And he began it — though still, it must be confessed, with inward questionings. Before a week had passed, however, every trace of irritation had fled, and he was once again the absorbed artist who sees the vision of his desire taking palpable shape at the end of his brush.

"It's all right," he said to Billy then, one evening. "I'm glad she changed. It's going to be the best, the very best thing I've ever done — I think, by the sketches."

"I'm so glad!" exclaimed Billy. "I'm so glad!" The repetition was so vehement that it sounded almost as if she were trying to convince herself as well as Bertram of something that was not true.

But it was true — Billy told herself very indignantly that it was; indeed it was! Yet the very fact that she had to tell herself this, caused her to know how perilously near she was to being actually jealous of that portrait of Marguerite Winthrop. And it shamed her.

Very sternly these days Billy reminded herself of what Kate had said about Bertram's belonging first to his Art. She thought with mortification, too, that it *did* look as if she were not the proper wife for an artist if she were going to feel like this — always. Very resolutely, then, Billy turned to her music. This was all the more easily done, for, not only did she have her usual concerts and the opera to enjoy, but she had become interested in an operetta her club was about to give; also she had taken up the new song again. Christmas being over, Mr. Arkwright had been to the house several times. He had changed some of the words and she had improved the melody. The work on the accompaniment was progressing finely now, and Billy was so glad! — when she was absorbed in her music she forgot sometimes that she was ever so unfit an artist's sweetheart as to be — jealous of a portrait.

It was quite early in the month that the usually expected "January thaw" came, and it was on a comparatively mild Friday at this time

that a matter of business took Billy into the neighborhood of Symphony Hall at about eleven o'clock in the morning. Dismissing John and the car upon her arrival, she said that she would later walk to the home of a friend near by, where she would remain until it was time for the Symphony Concert.

This friend was a girl whom Billy had known at school. She was studying now at the Conservatory of Music; and she had often urged Billy to come and have luncheon with her in her tiny apartment, which she shared with three other girls and a widowed aunt for housekeeper. On this particular Friday it had occurred to Billy that, owing to her business appointment at eleven and the Symphony Concert at half-past two, the intervening time would give her just the opportunity she had been seeking to enable her to accept her friend's invitation. A question asked, and enthusiastically answered in the affirmative, over the telephone that morning, therefore, had speedily completed arrangements, and she had agreed to be at her friend's door by twelve o'clock, or before.

As it happened, business did not take quite so long as she had expected, and half-past eleven found her well on her way to Miss Henderson's home.

In spite of the warm sunshine and the slushy snow in the streets, there was a cold, raw wind, and Billy was beginning to feel thankful that she had not far to go when she rounded a corner and came upon a long line of humanity that curved itself back and forth on the wide expanse of steps before Symphony Hall and then stretched itself far up the Avenue.

"Why, what — " she began under her breath; then suddenly she understood. It was Friday. A world-famous pianist was to play with the Symphony Orchestra that afternoon. This must be the line of patient waiters for the twenty-five-cent balcony seats that Mr. Arkwright had told about. With sympathetic, interested eyes, then, Billy stepped one side to watch the line, for a moment.

Almost at once two girls brushed by her, and one was saying:

"What a shame! — and after all our struggles to get here! If only we hadn't lost that other train!"

"We're too late — you no need to hurry!" the other wailed shrilly to a third girl who was hastening toward them. "The line is 'way beyond the Children's Hospital and around the corner now — and the ones there *never* get in!"

At the look of tragic disappointment that crossed

the third girl's face, Billy's heart ached. Her first impulse, of course, was to pull her own symphony ticket from her muff and hurry forward with a "Here, take mine!" But that would hardly do, she knew — though she *would* like to see Aunt Hannah's aghast face if this girl in the red sweater and white tam-o'-shanter should suddenly emerge from among the sumptuous satins and furs and plumes that afternoon and claim the adjacent orchestra chair. But it was out of the question, of course. There was only one seat, and there were three girls, besides all those others. With a sigh, then, Billy turned her eyes back to those others — those many others that made up the long line stretching its weary length up the Avenue.

There were more women than men, yet the men were there: jolly young men who were plainly students; older men whose refined faces and threadbare overcoats hinted at cultured minds and starved bodies; other men who showed no hollows in their cheeks nor near-holes in their garments. It seemed to Billy that women of almost all sorts were there, young, old, and middle-aged; students in tailored suits, widows in crape and veil; girls that were members of a merry party, women that were plainly forlorn and alone.

Some in the line shuffled restlessly; some stood

rigidly quiet. One had brought a camp stool; many were seated on the steps. Beyond, where the line passed an open lot, a wooden fence afforded a convenient prop. One read a book, another a paper. Three were studying what was probably the score of the symphony or of the concerto they expected to hear that afternoon.

A few did not appear to mind the biting wind, but most of them, by turned-up coat-collars or bent heads, testified to the contrary. Not far from Billy a woman nibbled a sandwich furtively, while beyond her a group of girls were hilariously merry over four triangles of pie which they held up where all might see.

Many of the faces were youthful, happy, and alert with anticipation; but others carried a wistfulness and a weariness that made Billy's heart ache. Her eyes, indeed, filled with quick tears. Later she turned to go, and it was then that she saw in the line a face that she knew — a face that drooped with such a white misery of spent strength that she hurried straight toward it with a low cry.

"Miss Greggory!" she exclaimed, when she reached the girl. "You look actually ill. Are you ill?"

For a brief second only dazed questioning stared from the girl's blue-gray eyes. Billy knew

when the recognition came, for she saw the painful color stain the white face red.

"Thank you, no. I am not ill, Miss Neilson," said the girl, coldly.

"But you look so tired out!"

"I have been standing here some time; that is all."

Billy threw a hurried glance down the far-reaching line that she knew had formed since the girl's two tired feet had taken their first position.

"But you must have come — so early! It isn't twelve o'clock yet," she faltered.

A slight smile curved Alice Greggory's lips.

"Yes, it was early," she rejoined a little bitterly; "but it had to be, you know. I wanted to hear the music; and with this soloist, and this weather, I knew that many others — would want to hear the music, too."

"But you look so white! How much longer — when will they let you in?" demanded Billy, raising indignant eyes to the huge, gray-pillared building before her, much as if she would pull down the walls if she could, and make way for this tired girl at her side.

Miss Greggory's thin shoulders rose and fell in an expressive shrug.

"Half-past one."

Billy gave a dismayed cry.

"Half-past one — almost two hours more! But, Miss Greggory, you can't — how can you stand it till then? You've shivered three times since I came, and you look as if you were going to faint away."

Miss Greggory shook her head.

"It is nothing, really," she insisted. "I am quite well. It is only — I didn't happen to feel like eating much breakfast this morning; and that, with no luncheon — " She let a gesture finish her sentence.

"No luncheon! Why — oh, you couldn't leave your place, of course," frowned Billy.

"No, and " — Alice Greggory lifted her head a little proudly — "I do not care to eat — here." Her scornful eyes were on one of the pieces of pie down the line — no longer a triangle.

"Of course not," agreed Billy, promptly. She paused, frowned, and bit her lip. Suddenly her face cleared. "There! the very thing," she exulted. "You shall have my ticket this afternoon, Miss Greggory, then you won't have to stay here another minute. Meanwhile, there is an excellent restaurant — "

"Thank you — no. I couldn't do that," cut in the other, sharply, but in a low voice.

"But you'll take my ticket," begged Billy.

Miss Greggory shook her head.

"Certainly not."

"But I want you to, please. I shall be very unhappy if you don't," grieved Billy.

The other made a peremptory gesture.

"*I* should be very unhappy if I did," she said with cold emphasis. "Really, Miss Neilson," she went on in a low voice, throwing an apprehensive glance at the man ahead, who was apparently absorbed in his newspaper, "I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to let me go on in my own way. You are very kind, but there is nothing you can do; nothing. You were very kind, too, of course, to send the book and the flowers to mother at Christmas; but —"

"Never mind that, please," interrupted Billy, hurriedly. Billy's head was lifted now. Her eyes were no longer pleading. Her round little chin looked square and determined. "If you simply will not take my ticket this afternoon, you *must* do this. Go to some restaurant near here and get a good luncheon — something that will sustain you. I will take your place here."

"*Miss Neilson!*"

Billy smiled radiantly. It was the first time she had ever seen Alice Greggory's haughtily cold reserve break into anything like naturalness — the astonished incredulity of that "Miss

Neilson!" was plainly straight from the heart; so, too, were the amazed words that followed.

"*You* — will stand *here?*"

"Certainly; I will keep your place. Don't worry. You sha'n't lose it." Billy spoke with a smiling indifference that was meant to convey the impression that standing in line for a twenty-five-cent seat was a daily habit of hers. "There's a restaurant only a little way — right down there," she finished. And before the dazed Alice Greggory knew quite what was happening she found herself outside the line, and the other in her place.

"But, Miss Neilson, I can't — you mustn't —" she stammered; then, because of something in the unyieldingness of the square young chin above the sealskin coat, and because she could not (she knew) use actual force to drag the owner of that chin out of the line, she bowed her head in acquiescence.

"Well, then — I will, long enough for some coffee and maybe a sandwich. And — thank you," she choked, as she turned and hurried away.

Billy drew the deep breath of one who has triumphed after long struggles — but the breath broke off short in a gasp of dismay: coming straight up the Avenue toward her was the one

person in the world Billy wished least to see at that moment — Bertram Henshaw. Billy remembered then that she had twice lately heard her lover speak of calling at the Boston Opera House concerning a commission to paint an ideal head to represent "Music" for some decorative purpose. The Opera House was only a short distance up the Avenue. Doubtless he was on his way there now.

He was very near by this time, and Billy held her breath suspended. There was a chance, of course, that he might not notice her; and Billy was counting on that chance — until a gust of wind whirled a loose half-sheet of newspaper from the hands of the man in front of her, and naturally attracted Bertram's eyes to its vicinity — and to hers. The next moment he was at her side and his dumfounded but softly-breathed "*Billy!*" was in her ears.

Billy bubbled into low laughter — there were such a lot of funny situations in the world, and of them all this one was about the drollest, she thought.

"Yes, I know," she gurgled. "You don't have to say it — your face is saying even more than your tongue *could!* This is just for a girl I know. I'm keeping her place."

Bertram frowned. He looked as if he were

meditating picking Billy up and walking off with her.

"But, Billy," he protested just above his breath, "this isn't sugarplums nor frosting; it's plain suicide — standing out in this wind like this! Besides — " He stopped with an angrily despairing glance at her surroundings.

"Yes, I know," she nodded, a little soberly, understanding the look and answering that first; "it isn't pleasant nor comfortable, in lots of ways — but *she's* had it all the morning. As for the cold — I'm as warm as toast. It won't be long, anyway; she's just gone to get something to eat. Then I'm going to May Henderson's for luncheon."

Bertram sighed impatiently and opened his lips — only to close them with the words unsaid. There was nothing he could do, and he had already said too much, he thought, with a savage glance at the man ahead who still had enough of his paper left to serve for a pretence at reading. As Bertram could see, however, the man was not reading a word — he was too acutely conscious of the handsome young woman in the long sealskin coat behind him. Billy was already the cynosure of dozens of eyes, and Bertram knew that his own arrival on the scene had not lessened the interest of the owners of those eyes. He only hoped devoutly that no one in the line knew him or Billy, and that

no one quite knew what had happened. He did not wish to see himself and his fiancée the subject of inch-high headlines in some evening paper figuring as:

"Talented young composer and her famous artist lover take poor girl's place in a twenty-five-cent ticket line."

He shivered at the thought.

"Are you cold?" worried Billy. "If you are, don't stand here, please!"

He shook his head silently. His eyes were searching the street for the only one whose coming could bring him relief.

It must have been but a coffee-and-sandwich luncheon for the girl, for soon she came. The man surmised that it was she, as soon as he saw her, and stepped back at once. He had no wish for introductions. A moment later the girl was in Billy's place, and Billy herself was at his side.

"That was Alice Greggory, Bertram," she told him, as they walked on swiftly; "and Bertram, she was actually almost *crying* when she took my place."

"Humph! Well, I should think she'd better be," growled Bertram, perversely.

"Pooh! It didn't hurt me any, dearie," laughed Billy with a conciliatory pat on his arm as they turned down the street upon which her friend

lived. "And now can you come in and see May a minute?"

"I'm afraid not," regretted Bertram. "I wish I could, but I'm busier than busy to-day — and I was *supposed* to be already late when I saw you. Jove, Billy, I just couldn't believe my eyes!"

"You looked it," twinkled Billy. "It was worth a farm just to see your face!"

"I'd want the farm — if I was going through that again," retorted the man, grimly — Bertram was still seeing that newspaper heading.

But Billy only laughed again.

CHAPTER XX

ARKWRIGHT TELLS A STORY

ARKWRIGHT called Monday afternoon by appointment; and together he and Billy put the finishing touches to the new song.

It was when, with Aunt Hannah, they were having tea before the fire a little later, that Billy told of her adventure the preceding Friday afternoon in front of Symphony Hall.

"You knew the girl, of course — I think you said you knew the girl," ventured Arkwright.

"Oh, yes. She was Alice Greggory. I met her with Uncle William first, over a Lowestoft teapot. Maybe you'd like to know *how* I met her," smiled Billy.

"Alice Greggory?" Arkwright's eyes showed a sudden interest. "I used to know an Alice Greggory, but it isn't the same one, probably. Her mother was a cripple."

Billy gave a little cry.

"Why, it is — it must be! *My* Alice Greggory's mother is a cripple. Oh, do you know them, really?"

"Well, it does look like it," rejoined Arkwright, showing even deeper interest. "I haven't seen them for four or five years. They used to live in our town. The mother was a little sweet-faced woman with young eyes and prematurely white hair."

"That describes my Mrs. Greggory exactly," cried Billy's eager voice. "And the daughter?"

"Alice? Why — as I said, it's been four years since I've seen her." A touch of constraint had come into Arkwright's voice which Billy's keen ear was quick to detect. "She was nineteen then — and very pretty."

"About my height, and with light-brown hair and big blue-gray eyes that look steely cold when she's angry?" questioned Billy.

"I reckon that's about it," acknowledged the man, with a faint smile.

"Then they *are* the ones," declared the girl, plainly excited. "Isn't that splendid? Now we can know them, and perhaps do something for them. I love that dear little mother already, and I think I should the daughter — if she didn't put out so many prickers that I couldn't get near her! But tell us about them. How did they come here? Why didn't you know they were here?"

"Are you good at answering a dozen questions

at once?" asked Aunt Hannah, turning smiling eyes from Billy to the man at her side.

"Well, I can try," he offered. "To begin with, they are Judge Greggory's widow and daughter. They belong to fine families on both sides, and they used to be well off — really wealthy, for a small town. But the judge was better at money-making than he was at money-keeping, and when he came to die his income stopped, of course, and his estate was found to be in bad shape through reckless loans and worthless investments. That was eight years ago. Things went from bad to worse then, until there was almost nothing left."

"I knew there was some such story as that back of them," declared Billy. "But how do you suppose they came here?"

"To get away from — everybody, I suspect," replied Arkwright. "That would be like them. They were very proud; and it isn't easy, you know, to be nobody where you've been somebody. It doesn't hurt quite so hard — to be nobody where you've never been anything but nobody."

"I suppose so," sighed Billy. "Still — they must have had friends."

"They did, of course; but when the love of one's friends becomes *too* highly seasoned with pity, it doesn't make a pleasant morsel to swallow,

specially if you don't like the taste of the pity — and there are people who don't, you know. The Greggorys were that kind. They were morbidly so. From their cheap little cottage, where they did their own work, they stepped out in their shabby garments and old-fashioned hats with heads even more proudly erect than in the old days when their home and their gowns and their doings were the admiration and envy of the town. You see, they didn't want — that pity."

"I *do* see," cried Billy, her face aglow with sudden understanding; "and I don't believe pity would be — nice!" Her own chin was held high as she spoke.

"It must have been hard, indeed," murmured Aunt Hannah with a sigh, as she set down her teacup.

"It was," nodded Arkwright. "Of course Mrs. Greggory, with her crippled foot, could do nothing to bring in any money except to sew a little. It all depended on Alice; and when matters got to their worst she began to teach. She was fond of music, and could play the piano well; and of course she had had the best instruction she could get from city teachers only twenty miles away from our home town. Young as she was — about seventeen when she began to teach, I think — she got a few beginners right away, and in

two years she had worked up quite a class, meanwhile keeping on with her own studies, herself.

"They might have carried the thing through, maybe," continued Arkwright, "and never *apparently* known that the 'pity' existed, if it hadn't been for some ugly rumors that suddenly arose attacking the Judge's honesty in an old matter that somebody raked up. That was too much. Under this last straw their courage broke utterly. Alice dismissed every pupil, sold almost all their remaining goods — they had lots of quite valuable heirlooms; I suspect that's where your Lowestoft teapot came in — and with the money thus gained they left town. Until they could go, they scarcely showed themselves once on the street, they were never at home to callers, and they left without telling one soul where they were going, so far as we could ever learn."

"Why, the poor dears!" cried Billy. "How they must have suffered! But things will be different now. You'll go to see them, of course, and —" At the look that came into Arkwright's face, she stopped in surprise.

"You forget; they wouldn't wish to see me," demurred the man. And again Billy noticed the odd constraint in his voice.

"But they wouldn't mind *you — here*," argued Billy.

"I'm afraid they would. In fact, I'm sure they'd refuse entirely to see me."

Billy's eyes grew determined.

"But they can't refuse — if I bring about a meeting just casually, you know," she challenged.

Arkwright laughed.

"Well, I won't pretend to say as to the consequences of that," he rejoined, rising to his feet; "but they might be disastrous. Wasn't it you yourself who were telling me a few minutes ago how steely cold Miss Alice's eyes got when she was angry?"

Billy knew by the way the man spoke that, for some reason, he did not wish to prolong the subject of his meeting the Greggorys. She made a quick shift, therefore, to another phase of the matter.

"But tell me, please, before you go, how did those rumors come out — about Judge Greggory's honesty, I mean?"

"Why, I never knew, exactly," frowned Arkwright, musingly. "Yet it seems, too, that mother did say in one letter, while I was in Paris, that some of the accusations had been found to be false, and that there was a prospect that the Judge's good name might be saved, after all."

"Oh, I wish it might," sighed Billy. "Think what it would mean to those women!"

"'Twould mean everything," cried Arkwright,

warmly; "and I'll write to mother to-night, I will, and find out just what there is to it — if anything. Then you can tell them," he finished a little stiffly.

"Yes — or you," nodded Billy, lightly. And because she began at once to speak of something else, the first part of her sentence passed without comment.

The door had scarcely closed behind Arkwright when Billy turned to Aunt Hannah a beaming face.

"Aunt Hannah, did you notice?" she cried, "how Mary Jane looked and acted whenever Alice Greggory was spoken of? There was something between them — I'm sure there was; and they quarrelled, probably."

"Why, no, dear; I didn't see anything unusual," murmured the elder lady.

"Well, I did. And I'm going to be the fairy godmother that straightens everything all out, too. See if I'm not! They'd make a splendid couple, Aunt Hannah. I'm going right down there to-morrow."

"Billy, my dear!" exclaimed the more conservative old lady, "aren't you taking things a little too much for granted? Maybe they don't wish for — for a fairy godmother!"

"Oh, *they* won't know I'm a fairy godmother — not one of them; and of course I wouldn't

mention even a hint to anybody," laughed Billy. "I'm just going down to get acquainted with the Greggorys; that's all. Only think, Aunt Hannah, what they must have suffered! And look at the place they're living in now — gentlewomen like them!"

"Yes, yes, poor things, poor things!" sighed Aunt Hannah.

"I hope I'll find out that she's really good — at teaching, I mean — the daughter," resumed Billy, after a moment's pause. "If she is, there's one thing I can do to help, anyhow. I can get some of Marie's old pupils for her. I *know* some of them haven't begun with a new teacher, yet; and Mrs. Carleton told me last Friday that neither she nor her sister was at all satisfied with the one their girls *have* taken. They'd change, I know, in a minute, at my recommendation — that is, of course, if I can *give* the recommendation," continued Billy, with a troubled frown. "Anyhow, I'm going down to begin operations to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXI

A MATTER OF STRAIGHT BUSINESS

TRUE to her assertion, Billy went down to the Greggorys' the next day. This time she did not take Rosa with her. Even Aunt Hannah conceded that it would not be necessary. She had not been gone ten minutes, however, when the telephone bell rang, and Rosa came to say that Mr. Bertram Henshaw wanted to speak with Mrs. Stetson.

"Rosa says that Billy's not there," called Bertram's aggrieved voice, when Aunt Hannah had said, "Good morning, my boy."

"Dear me, no, Bertram. She's in a fever of excitement this morning. She'll probably tell you all about it when you come out here to-night. You *are* coming out to-night, aren't you?"

"Yes; oh, yes! But what is it? Where's she gone?"

Aunt Hannah laughed softly.

"Well, she's gone down to the Greggorys'."

"The Greggorys'! What — again?"

"Oh, you might as well get used to it, Bertram,"

bantered Aunt Hannah, "for there'll be a good many 'agains,' I fancy."

"Why, Aunt Hannah, what do you mean?" Bertram's voice was not quite pleased.

"Oh, she'll tell you. It's only that the Greggorys have turned out to be old friends of Mr. Arkwright's."

"*Friends* of Arkwright's!" Bertram's voice was decidedly displeased now.

"Yes; and there's quite a story to it all, as well. Billy is wildly excited, as you'd know she would be. You'll hear all about it to-night, of course."

"Yes, of course," echoed Bertram. But there was no ring of enthusiasm in his voice, neither then, nor when he said good-by a moment later.

Billy, meanwhile, on her way to the Greggory home, was, as Aunt Hannah had said, "wildly excited." It seemed so strange and wonderful and delightful — the whole affair: that she should have found them because of a Lowestoft teapot, that Arkwright should know them, and that there should be the chance now that she might help them — in some way; though this last, she knew, could be accomplished only through the exercise of the greatest tact and delicacy. She had not forgotten that Arkwright had told her of their hatred of pity.

In the sober second thought of the morning, Billy was not sure now of a possible romance in connection with Arkwright and the daughter, Alice; but she had by no means abandoned the idea, and she meant to keep her eyes open — and if there should be a chance to bring such a thing about —! Meanwhile, of course, she should not mention the matter, even to Bertram.

Just what would be her method of procedure this first morning, Billy had not determined. The pretty potted azalea in her hand would be excuse for her entrance into the room. After that, circumstances must decide for themselves.

Mrs. Greggory was found to be alone at home as before, and Billy was glad. She would rather begin with one than two, she thought. The little woman greeted her cordially, gave misty-eyed thanks for the beautiful plant, and also for Billy's kind thoughtfulness Friday afternoon. From that she was very skilfully led to talk more of the daughter; and soon Billy was getting just the information she wanted — information concerning the character, aims, and daily life of Alice Greggory.

"You see, we have some money — a very little," explained Mrs. Greggory, after a time; "though to get it we have had to sell all our treasures — but the Lowestoft," with a quick glance into Billy's eyes. "We need not, perhaps, live in

quite so poor a place; but we prefer — just now — to spend the little money we have for something other than imitation comfort — lessons, for instance, and an occasional concert. My daughter is studying even while she is teaching. She hopes to train herself for an accompanist, and for a teacher. She does not aspire to concert solo work. She understands her limitations."

"But she is probably — very good — at teaching." Billy hesitated a little.

"She is; very good. She has the best of recommendations." A little proudly Mrs. Greggory gave the names of two Boston pianists — names that would carry weight anywhere.

Unconsciously Billy relaxed. She did not know until that moment how she had worried for fear she could not, conscientiously, recommend this Alice Greggory.

"Of course," resumed the mother, "Alice's pupils are few, and they pay low prices; but she is gaining. She goes to the houses, of course. She herself practises two hours a day at a house up on Pinckney Street. She gives lessons to a little girl in return."

"I see," nodded Billy, brightly; "and I've been thinking, Mrs. Greggory — maybe I know of some pupils she could get. I have a friend who has just given hers up, owing to her marriage.

Sometime, soon, I'm going to talk to your daughter, if I may, and — "

" And here she is right now," interposed Mrs. Greggory, as the door opened under a hurried hand.

Billy flushed and bit her lip. She was disturbed and disappointed. She did not particularly wish to see Alice Greggory just then. She wished even less to see her when she noted the swift change that came to the girl's face at sight of herself.

" Oh! Why — good morning, Miss Neilson," murmured Miss Greggory with a smile so forced that her mother hurriedly looked to the azalea in search of a possible peacemaker.

" My dear, see," she stammered, " what Miss Neilson has brought me. And it's so full of blossoms, too! And she says it'll remain so for a long, long time — if we'll only keep it wet."

Alice Greggory murmured a low something — a something that she tried, evidently, very hard to make politely appropriate and appreciative. Yet her manner, as she took off her hat and coat and sat down, so plainly said: " You are very kind, of course, but I wish you would keep yourself and your plants at home! " that Mrs. Greggory began a hurried apology, much as if the words had indeed been spoken.

" My daughter is really ill this morning. You

mustn't mind — that is, I'm afraid you'll think — you see, she took cold last week; a bad cold — and she isn't over it, yet," finished the little woman in painful embarrassment.

"Of course she took cold — standing all those hours in that horrid wind, Friday!" cried Billy, indignantly.

A quick red flew to Alice Greggory's face. Billy saw it at once and fervently wished she had spoken of anything but that Friday afternoon. It looked almost as if she were *reminding* them of what she had done that day. In her confusion, and in her anxiety to say something — anything that would get their minds off that idea — she uttered now the first words that came into her head. As it happened, they were the last words that sober second thought would have told her to say.

"Never mind, Mrs. Greggory. We'll have her all well and strong soon; never fear! Just wait till I send Peggy and Mary Jane to take her out for a drive one of these mild, sunny days. You have no idea how much good it will do her!"

Alice Greggory got suddenly to her feet. Her face was very white now. Her eyes had the steely coldness that Billy knew so well. Her voice, when she spoke, was low and sternly controlled.

"Miss Neilson, you will think me rude, of course, especially after your great kindness to me the other day; but I can't help it. It seems to me best to speak now before it goes any further."

"Alice, dear," remonstrated Mrs. Greggory, extending a frightened hand.

The girl did not turn her head nor hesitate; but she caught the extended hand and held it warmly in both her own, with gentle little pats, while she went on speaking.

"I'm sure mother agrees with me that it is best, for the present, that we keep quite to ourselves. I cannot question *your* kindness, of course, after your somewhat unusual favor the other day; but I am very sure that your friends, Miss Peggy, and Miss Mary Jane, have no real desire to make my acquaintance, nor — if you'll pardon me — have I, under the circumstances, any wish to make theirs."

"Oh, Alice, Alice," began the little mother, in dismay; but a rippling laugh from their visitor brought an angry flush even to her gentle face.

Billy understood the flush, and struggled for self-control.

"Please — please, forgive me!" she choked. "But you see — you couldn't, of course, know that Mary Jane and Peggy aren't *girls*. They're just a man and an automobile!"

An unwilling smile trembled on Alice Greggory's lips; but she still stood her ground.

"After all, girls, or men and automobiles, Miss Neilson — it makes little difference. They're — charity. And it's not so long that we've been objects of charity that we quite really enjoy it — yet."

There was a moment's hush. Billy's eyes had filled with tears.

"I never even *thought* — charity," said Billy, so gently that a faint red stole into the white cheeks opposite.

For a tense minute Alice Greggory held herself erect; then, with a complete change of manner and voice, she released her mother's hand, dropped into her own chair again, and said wearily:

"I know you didn't, Miss Neilson. It's all my foolish pride, of course. It's only that I was thinking how dearly I would love to meet girls again — just as *girls!* But — I no longer have any business with pride, of course. I shall be pleased, I'm sure," she went on dully, "to accept anything you may do for us, from automobile rides to — to red flannel petticoats."

Billy almost — but not quite — laughed. Still, the laugh would have been near to a sob, had it been given. Surprising as was the quick transition in the girl's manner, and absurd as was the

juxtaposition of automobiles and red flannel petticoats, the white misery of Alice Greggory's face and the weary despair of her attitude were tragic — specially to one who knew her story as did Billy Neilson. And it was because Billy did know her story that she did not make the mistake now of offering pity. Instead, she said with a bright smile, and a casual manner that gave no hint of studied labor:

"Well, as it happens, Miss Greggory, what I want to-day has nothing whatever to do with automobiles or red flannel petticoats. It's a matter of straight business." (How Billy blessed the thought that had so suddenly come to her!) "Your mother tells me you play accompaniments. Now a girls' club, of which I am a member, is getting up an operetta for charity, and we need an accompanist. There is no one in the club who is able, and at the same time willing, to spend the amount of time necessary for practice and rehearsals. So we had decided to hire one outside, and I have been given the task of finding one. It has occurred to me that perhaps you would be willing to undertake it for us. Would you?"

Billy knew, at once, from the quick change in the other's face and manner, that she had taken exactly the right course to relieve the strain of the situation. Despair and lassitude fell away

from Alice Greggory almost like a garment. Her countenance became alert and interested.

"Indeed I would! I should be glad to do it."

"Good! Then can you come out to my home sometime to-morrow, and go over the music with me? Rehearsals will not begin until next week; but I can give you the music, and tell you something of what we are planning to do."

"Yes. I could come at ten in the morning for an hour, or at three in the afternoon for two hours or more," replied Miss Greggory, after a moment's hesitation.

"Suppose we call it in the afternoon, then," smiled Billy, as she rose to her feet. "And now I must go — and here's my address," she finished, taking out her card and laying it on the table near her.

For reasons of her own Billy went away that morning without saying anything more about the proposed new pupils. New pupils were not automobile rides nor petticoats, to be sure — but she did not care to risk disturbing the present interested happiness of Alice Greggory's face by mentioning anything that might be construed as too officious an assistance.

On the whole, Billy felt well pleased with her morning's work. To Aunt Hannah, upon her return, she expressed herself thus:

"It's splendid — even better than I hoped. I shall have a chance to-morrow, of course, to see for myself just how well she plays, and all that. I'm pretty sure, though, from what I hear, that that part will be all right. Then the operetta will give us a chance to see a good deal of her, and to bring about a natural meeting between her and Mary Jane. Oh, Aunt Hannah, I couldn't have *planned* it better — and there the whole thing just tumbled into my hands! I knew it had the minute I remembered about the operetta. You know I'm chairman, and they left me to get the accompanist; and like a flash it came to me, when I was wondering *what* to say or do to get her out of that awful state she was in — 'Ask her to be your accompanist.' And I did. And I'm so glad I did! Oh, Aunt Hannah, it's coming out lovely! — I know it is."

CHAPTER XXII

PLANS AND PLOTTINGS

To Billy, Alice Greggory's first visit to Hillside was in every way a delight and a satisfaction. To Alice, it was even more than that. For the first time in years she found herself welcomed into a home of wealth, culture, and refinement as an equal; and the frank cordiality and naturalness of her hostess's evident expectation of meeting a congenial companion was like balm to a sensitive soul rendered morbid by long years of superciliousness and snubbing.

No wonder that under the cheery friendliness of it all, Alice Greggory's cold reserve vanished, and that in its place came something very like her old ease and charm of manner. By the time Aunt Hannah — according to previous agreement — came into the room, the two girls were laughing and chatting over the operetta as if they had known each other for years.

Much to Billy's delight, Alice Greggory, as a musician, proved to be eminently satisfactory.

She was quick at sight reading, and accurate. She played easily, and with good expression. Particularly was she a good accompanist, possessing to a marked degree that happy faculty of *accompanying* a singer: which means that she neither led the way nor lagged behind, being always exactly in sympathetic step — than which nothing is more soul-satisfying to the singer.

It was after the music for the operetta had been well-practised and discussed that Alice Greggory chanced to see one of Billy's own songs lying near her. With a pleased smile she picked it up.

"Oh, you know this, too!" she cried. "I played it for a lady only the other day. It's so pretty, I think — all of hers are, that I have seen. Billy Neilson is a girl, you know, they say, in spite of —" She stopped abruptly. Her eyes grew wide and questioning. "Miss Neilson — it can't be — you don't mean — is your name — it *is — you!*" she finished joyously, as the telltale color dyed Billy's face. The next moment her own cheeks burned scarlet. "And to think of my letting *you* stand in line for a twenty-five-cent admission!" she scorned.

"Nonsense!" laughed Billy. "It didn't hurt me any more than it did you. Come!" — in looking about for a quick something to take her guest's attention, Billy's eyes fell on the manu-

script copy of her new song, bearing Arkwright's name. Yielding to a daring impulse, she drew it hastily forward. "Here's a new one — a brand-new one, not even printed yet. Don't you think the words are pretty?" she asked.

As she had hoped, Alice Greggory's eyes, after they had glanced half-way through the first page, sought the name at the left side below the title.

"'Words by M. J. —'" — there was a visible start, and a pause before the "'Arkwright'" was uttered in a slightly different tone.

Billy noted both the start and the pause — and gloried in them.

"Yes; the words are by M. J. Arkwright," she said with smooth unconcern, but with a covert glance at the other's face. "Ever hear of him?"

Alice Greggory gave a short little laugh.

"Probably not — this one. I used to know an M. J. Arkwright, long ago; but he wasn't — a poet, so far as I know," she finished, with a little catch in her breath that made Billy long to take her into a warm embrace.

Alice Greggory turned then to the music. She had much to say of this — very much; but she had nothing more whatever to say of Mr. M. J. Arkwright in spite of the tempting conversation bait that Billy dropped so freely. After that, Rosa brought in tea and toast, and the little

frosted cakes that were always such a favorite with Billy's guests. Then Alice Greggory said good-by — her eyes full of tears that Billy pretended not to see.

"There!" breathed Billy, as soon as she had Aunt Hannah to herself again. "What did I tell you? Did you see Miss Greggory's start and blush and hear her sigh just over the *name* of M. J. Arkwright? Just as if —! Now I want them to meet; only it must be casual, Aunt Hannah — casual! And I'd rather wait till Mary Jane hears from his mother, if possible, so if there *is* anything good to tell the poor girl, he can tell it."

"Yes, of course. Dear child! — I hope he can," murmured Aunt Hannah. (Aunt Hannah had ceased now trying to make Billy refrain from the reprehensible "Mary Jane." In fact, if the truth were known, Aunt Hannah herself in her thoughts — and sometimes in her words — called him "Mary Jane.") "But, indeed, my dear, I didn't see anything stiff, or — or repelling about Miss Greggory, as you said there was."

"There wasn't — to-day," smiled Billy. "Honestly, Aunt Hannah, I should never have known her for the same girl — who showed me the door that first morning," she finished merrily, as she turned to go up-stairs.

It was the next day that Cyril and Marie came home from their honeymoon. They went directly to their pretty little apartment on Beacon Street, Brookline, within easy walking distance of Billy's own cozy home.

Cyril intended to build in a year or two. Meanwhile they had a very pretty, convenient home which was, according to Bertram, "electrified to within an inch of its life, and equipped with everything that was fireless, smokeless, dustless, and laborless." In it Marie had a spotlessly white kitchen where she might make puddings to her heart's content.

Marie had — again according to Bertram — "a visiting acquaintance with a maid." In other words, a stout woman was engaged to come two days in the week to wash, iron, and scrub; also to come in each night to wash the dinner dishes, thus leaving Marie's evenings free — "for the shaded lamp," Billy said.

Marie had not arrived at this — to her, delightful — arrangement of a "visiting acquaintance" without some opposition from her friends. Even Billy had stood somewhat aghast.

"But, my dear, won't it be hard for you, to do so much?" she argued one day. "You know you aren't very strong."

"I know; but it won't be hard, as I've planned

it," replied Marie, " specially when I've been longing for years to do this very thing. Why, Billy, if I had to stand by and watch a maid do all these things I want to do myself, I should feel just like — like a hungry man who sees another man eating up his dinner! Oh, of course," she added plaintively, after Billy's laughter had subsided, " I sha'n't do it always. I don't expect to. Of course, when we have a house — I'm not sure, then, though, that I sha'n't dress up the maid and order her to receive the calls and go to the pink teas, while I make her puddings," she finished saucily, as Billy began to laugh again.

The bride and groom, as was proper, were, soon after their arrival, invited to dine at both William's and Billy's. Then, until Marie's " At Homes " should begin, the devoted couple settled down to quiet days by themselves, with only occasional visits from the family to interrupt — " interrupt " was Bertram's word, not Marie's. Though it is safe to say it was not far different from the one Cyril used — in his thoughts.

Bertram himself, these days, was more than busy. Besides working on Miss Winthrop's portrait, and on two or three other commissions, he was putting the finishing touches to four pictures which he was to show in the exhibition soon to be held by a prominent Art Club of which he was

the acknowledged "star" member. Naturally, therefore, his time was well occupied. Naturally, too, Billy, knowing this, lashed herself more sternly than ever into a daily reminder of Kate's assertion that he belonged first to his Art.

In pursuance of this idea, Billy was careful to see that no engagement with herself should in any way interfere with the artist's work, and that no word of hers should attempt to keep him at her side when ART called. (Billy always spelled that word now in her mind with tall, black letters — the way it had sounded when it fell from Kate's lips.) That these tactics on her part were beginning to fill her lover with vague alarm and a very definite unrest, she did not once suspect. Eagerly, therefore, — even with conscientious delight — she welcomed the new song-words that Arkwright brought — they would give her something else to take up her time and attention. She welcomed them, also, for another reason: they would bring Arkwright more often to the house, and this would, of course, lead to that "casual meeting" between him and Alice Greggory when the rehearsals for the operetta should commence — which would be very soon now. And Billy did so long to bring about that meeting!

To Billy, all this was but "occupying her mind," and playing Cupid's assistant to a worthy young

couple torn cruelly apart by an unfeeling fate. To Bertram — to Bertram it was terror, and woe, and all manner of torture; for in it Bertram saw only a growing fondness on the part of Billy for Arkwright, Arkwright's music, Arkwright's words, and Arkwright's friends.

The first rehearsal for the operetta came on Wednesday evening. There would be another on Thursday afternoon. Billy had told Alice Greggory to arrange her pupils so that she could stay Wednesday night at Hillside, if the crippled mother could get along alone — and she could, Alice had said. Thursday forenoon, therefore, Alice Greggory would, in all probability, be at Hillside, specially as there would doubtless be an appointment or two for private rehearsal with some nervous soloist whose part was not progressing well. Such being the case, Billy had a plan she meant to carry out. She was highly pleased, therefore, when Thursday morning came, and everything, apparently, was working exactly to her mind.

Alice was there. She had an appointment at quarter of eleven with the leading tenor, and another later with the alto. After breakfast, therefore, Billy said decisively:

"Now, if you please, Miss Greggory, I'm going to put you up-stairs on the couch in the sewing-room for a nap."

"But I've just got up," remonstrated Miss Greggory.

"I know you have," smiled Billy; "but you were very late to bed last night, and you've got a hard day before you. I insist upon your resting. You will be absolutely undisturbed there, and you must shut the door and not come down-stairs till I send for you. Mr. Johnson isn't due till quarter of eleven, is he?"

"N-no."

"Then come with me," directed Billy, leading the way up-stairs. "There, now, don't come down till I call you," she went on, when they had reached the little room at the end of the hall. "I'm going to leave Aunt Hannah's door open, so you'll have good air — she isn't in there. She's writing letters in my room, Now here's a book, and you *may* read, but I should prefer you to sleep," she nodded brightly as she went out and shut the door quietly. Then, like the guilty conspirator she was, she went down-stairs to wait for Arkwright.

It was a fine plan. Arkwright was due at ten o'clock — Billy had specially asked him to come at that hour. He would not know, of course, that Alice Greggory was in the house; but soon after his arrival Billy meant to excuse herself for a moment, slip up-stairs and send Alice Greggory

down for a book, a pair of scissors, a shawl for Aunt Hannah — anything would do for a pretext, anything so that the girl might walk into the living-room and find Arkwright waiting for her alone. And then — What happened next was, in Billy's mind, very vague, but very attractive as a nucleus for one's thoughts, nevertheless.

All this was, indeed, a fine plan; but — (If only fine plans would not so often have a " but " !) In Billy's case the " but " had to do with things so apparently unrelated as were Aunt Hannah's clock and a negro's coal wagon. The clock struck eleven at half-past ten, and the wagon dumped itself to destruction directly in front of a trolley car in which sat Mr. M. J. Arkwright, hurrying to keep his appointment with Miss Billy Neilson. It was almost half-past ten when Arkwright finally rang the bell at Hillside. Billy greeted him so eagerly, and at the same time with such evident disappointment at his late arrival, that Arkwright's heart sang with joy.

" But there's a rehearsal at quarter of eleven," exclaimed Billy, in answer to his hurried explanation of the delay; " and this gives so little time for — for — so little time, you know," she finished in confusion, casting frantically about in her mind for an excuse to hurry up-stairs and

send Alice Greggory down before it should be quite too late.

No wonder that Arkwright, noting the sparkle in her eye, the agitation in her manner, and the embarrassed red in her cheek, took new courage. For so long had this girl held him at the end of a major third or a diminished seventh; for so long had she blithely accepted his every word and act as devotion to music, not herself — for so long had she done all this that he had come to fear that never would she do anything else. No wonder then, that now, in the soft radiance of the strange, new light on her face, his own face glowed ardently, and that he leaned forward with an impetuous rush of eager words.

"But there is time, Miss Billy — if you'd give me leave — to say — "

"I'm afraid I kept you waiting," interrupted the hurried voice of Alice Greggory from the hall doorway. "I was asleep, I think, when a clock somewhere, striking eleven — Why, Mr. — Arkwright!"

Not until Alice Greggory had nearly crossed the room did she see that the man standing by her hostess was — not the tenor she had expected to find — but an old acquaintance. Then it was that the tremulous "Mr. — Arkwright!" fell from her lips.

Billy and Arkwright had turned at her first words. At her last, Arkwright, with a half-despairing, half-reproachful glance at Billy, stepped forward.

"Miss Greggory! — you *are* Miss Alice Greggory, I am sure," he said pleasantly.

At the first opportunity Billy murmured a hasty excuse and left the room. To Aunt Hannah she flew with a woebegone face.

"Oh, Aunt Hannah, Aunt Hannah," she wailed, half laughing, half crying; "that wretched little fib-teller of a clock of yours spoiled it all!"

"Spoiled it! Spoiled what, child?"

"My first meeting between Mary Jane and Miss Greggory. I had it all arranged that they were to have it *alone;* but that miserable little fibber up-stairs struck eleven at half-past ten, and Miss Greggory heard it and thought she was fifteen minutes late. So down she hurried, half awake, and spoiled all my plans. Now she's sitting in there with him, in chairs the length of the room apart, discussing the snowstorm last night or the moonrise this morning — or some other such silly thing. And I had it so beautifully planned!"

"Well, well, dear, I'm sorry, I'm sure," smiled Aunt Hannah; "but I can't think any real harm

is done. Did Mary Jane have anything to tell her — about her father, I mean? "

Only the faintest flicker of Billy's eyelid testified that the everyday accustomedness of that " Mary Jane " on Aunt Hannah's lips had not escaped her.

" No, nothing definite. Yet there was a little. Friends are still trying to clear his name, and I believe are meeting with increasing success. I don't know, of course, whether he'll say anything about it to-day — *now*. To think I had to be right round under foot like that when they met! " went on Billy, indignantly. " I shouldn't have been, in a minute more, though. I was just trying to think up an excuse to come up and send down Miss Greggory, when Mary Jane began to tell me something — I haven't the faintest idea what — then *she* appeared, and it was all over. And there's the doorbell, and the tenor, I suppose; so of course it's all over now," she sighed, rising to go down-stairs.

As it chanced, however, it was not the tenor, but a message from him — a message that brought dire consternation to the Chairman of the Committee of Arrangements. The tenor had thrown up his part. He could not take it; it was too difficult. He felt that this should be told at once rather than to worry along for another week or two, and then give up. So he had told it.

"But what shall we do, Miss Greggory?" appealed Billy. "It *is* a hard part, you know; but if Mr. Tobey can't take it, I don't know who can. We don't want to hire a singer for it, if we can help it. The profits are to go to the Home for Crippled Children, you know," she explained, turning to Arkwright, "and we decided to hire only the accompanist."

An odd expression flitted across Miss Greggory's face.

"Mr. Arkwright used to sing — tenor," she observed quietly.

"As if he didn't now — a perfectly glorious tenor," retorted Billy. "But as if *he* would take *this!*"

For only a brief moment did Arkwright hesitate; then blandly he suggested:

"Suppose you try him, and see."

Billy sat suddenly erect.

"Would you, really? *Could* you — take the time, and all?" she cried.

"Yes, I think I would — under the circumstances," he smiled. "I think I could, too, though I might not be able to attend all the rehearsals. Still, if I find I have to ask permission, I'll endeavor to convince the powers-that-be that singing in this operetta will be just the stepping-stone I need to success in Grand Opera."

"Oh, if you only would take it," breathed Billy, "we'd be so glad!"

"Well," said Arkwright, his eyes on Billy's frankly delighted face, "as I said before — under the circumstances I think I would."

"Thank you! Then it's all beautifully settled," rejoiced Billy, with a happy sigh; and unconsciously she gave Alice Greggory's hand near her a little pat.

In Billy's mind the "circumstances" of Arkwright's acceptance of the part were Alice Greggory and her position as accompanist, of course. Billy would have been surprised indeed — and dismayed — had she known that in Arkwright's mind the "circumstances" were herself, and the fact that she, too, had a part in the operetta, necessitating her presence at rehearsals, and hinting at a delightful comradeship impossible, perhaps, otherwise.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CAUSE AND BERTRAM

FEBRUARY came. The operetta, for which Billy was working so hard, was to be given the twentieth. The Art Exhibition, for which Bertram was preparing his four pictures, was to open the sixteenth, with a private view for specially invited friends the evening before.

On the eleventh day of February Mrs. Greggory and her daughter arrived at Hillside for a ten-days' visit. Not until after a great deal of pleading and argument, however, had Billy been able to bring this about.

"But, my dears, both of you," Billy had at last said to them; "just listen. We shall have numberless rehearsals during those last ten days before the thing comes off. They will be at all hours, and of all lengths. You, Miss Greggory, will have to be on hand for them all, of course, and will have to stay all night several times, probably. You, Mrs. Greggory, ought not to be alone down here. There is no sensible, valid reason why you should not both come out to the

house for those ten days; and I shall feel seriously hurt and offended if you do not consent to do it."

"But — my pupils," Alice Greggory had demurred.

"You can go in town from my home at any time to give your lessons, and a little shifting about and arranging for those ten days will enable you to set the hours conveniently one after another, I am sure, so you can attend to several on one trip. Meanwhile your mother will be having a lovely time teaching Aunt Hannah how to knit a new shawl; so you won't have to be worrying about her."

After all, it had been the great good and pleasure which the visit would bring to Mrs. Greggory that had been the final straw to tip the scales. On the eleventh of February, therefore, in the company of the once scorned "Peggy and Mary Jane," Alice Greggory and her mother had arrived at Hillside.

Ever since the first meeting of Alice Greggory and Arkwright, Billy had been sorely troubled by the conduct of the two young people. She had, as she mournfully told herself, been able to make nothing of it. The two were civility itself to each other, but very plainly they were not at ease in each other's company; and Billy, much to her

surprise, had to admit that Arkwright did not appear to appreciate the "circumstances" now that he had them. The pair called each other, ceremoniously, "Mr. Arkwright," and "Miss Greggory" — but then, that, of course, did not "signify," Billy declared to herself.

"I suppose you don't ever call him 'Mary Jane,'" she said to the girl, a little mischievously, one day.

"'Mary Jane'? Mr. Arkwright? No, I don't," rejoined Miss Greggory, with an odd smile. Then, after a moment, she added: "I believe his brothers and sisters used to, however."

"Yes, I know," laughed Billy. "We thought he was a real Mary Jane, once." And she told the story of his arrival. "So you see," she finished, when Alice Greggory had done laughing over the tale, "he always will be 'Mary Jane' to us. By the way, what is his name?"

Miss Greggory looked up in surprise.

"Why, it's —" She stopped short, her eyes questioning. "Why, hasn't he ever told you?" she queried.

Billy lifted her chin.

"No. He told us to guess it, and we have guessed everything we can think of, even up to 'Methuselah John'; but he says we haven't hit it yet."

"'Methuselah John,' indeed!" laughed the other, merrily.

"Well, I'm sure that's a nice, solid name," defended Billy, her chin still at a challenging tilt. "If it isn't 'Methuselah John,' what is it, then?"

But Alice Greggory shook her head. She, too, it seemed, could be firm, on occasion. And though she smiled brightly, all she would say, was:

"If he hasn't told you, I sha'n't. You'll have to go to him."

"Oh, well, I can still call him 'Mary Jane,'" retorted Billy, with airy disdain.

All this, however, so far as Billy could see, was not in the least helping along the cause that had become so dear to her — the reuniting of a pair of lovers. It occurred to her then, one day, that perhaps, after all, they were not lovers, and did not wish to be reunited. At this disquieting thought Billy decided, suddenly, to go almost to headquarters. She would speak to Mrs. Greggory if ever the opportunity offered. Great was her joy, therefore, when, a day or two after the Greggorys arrived at the house, Mrs. Greggory's chance reference to Arkwright and her daughter gave Billy the opportunity she sought.

"They used to know each other long ago, Mr. Arkwright tells me," Billy began warily.

"Yes."

The quietly polite monosyllable was not very encouraging, to be sure; but Billy, secure in her conviction that her cause was a righteous one, refused to be daunted.

"I think it was so romantic — their running across each other like this, Mrs. Greggory," she murmured. "And there *was* a romance, wasn't there? I have just felt in my bones that there was — a romance!"

Billy held her breath. It was what she had meant to say, but now that she had said it, the words seemed very fearsome indeed — to say to Mrs. Greggory. Then Billy remembered her Cause, and took heart — Billy was spelling it now with a capital C.

For a long minute Mrs. Greggory did not answer — for so long a minute that Billy's breath dropped into a fluttering sigh, and her Cause became suddenly "IMPERTINENCE" spelled in black capitals. Then Mrs. Greggory spoke slowly, a little sadly.

"I don't mind saying to you that I did hope, once, that there would be a romance there. They were the best of friends, and they were well-suited to each other in tastes and temperament. I think, indeed, that the romance was well under way (though there was never an engagement)

when — " Mrs. Greggory paused and wet her lips. Her voice, when she resumed, carried the stern note so familiar to Billy in her first acquaintance with this woman and her daughter. " As I presume Mr. Arkwright has told you, we have met with many changes in our life — changes which necessitated a new home and a new mode of living. Naturally, under those circumstances, old friends — and old romances — must change, too."

" But, Mrs. Greggory," stammered Billy, " I'm sure Mr. Arkwright would want — " An uplifted hand silenced her peremptorily.

" Mr. Arkwright was very kind, and a gentleman, always," interposed the lady, coldly; " but Judge Greggory's daughter would not allow herself to be placed where apologies for her father would be necessary — *ever!* There, please, dear Miss Neilson, let us not talk of it any more," begged Mrs. Greggory, brokenly.

" No, indeed, of course not! " cried Billy; but her heart rejoiced.

She understood it all now. Arkwright and Alice Greggory had been almost lovers when the charges against the Judge's honor had plunged the family into despairing humiliation. Then had come the time when, according to Arkwright's own story, the two women had shut themselves indoors, re-

fused to see their friends, and left town as soon as possible. Thus had come the breaking of whatever tie there was between Alice Greggory and Arkwright. Not to have broken it would have meant, for Alice, the placing of herself in a position where, sometime, apologies must be made for her father. This was what Mrs. Greggory had meant — and again, as Billy thought of it, Billy's heart rejoiced.

Was not her way clear now before her? Did she not have it in her power, possibly — even probably — to bring happiness where only sadness was before? As if it would not be a simple thing to rekindle the old flame — to make these two estranged hearts beat as one again!

Not now was the Cause an IMPERTINENCE in tall black letters. It was, instead, a shining beacon in letters of flame guiding straight to victory.

Billy went to sleep that night making plans for Alice Greggory and Arkwright to be thrown together naturally — " just as a matter of course, you know," she said drowsily to herself, all in the dark.

Some three or four miles away down Beacon Street at that moment Bertram Henshaw, in the Strata, was, as it happened, not falling asleep. He was lying broadly and unhappily awake. Ber-

tram very frequently lay broadly and unhappily awake these days — or rather nights. He told himself, on these occasions, that it was perfectly natural — indeed it was! — that Billy should be with Arkwright and his friends, the Greggorys, so much. There were the new songs, and the operetta with its rehearsals as a cause for it all. At the same time, deep within his fearful soul was the consciousness that Arkwright, the Greggorys, and the operetta were but Music — Music, the spectre that from the first had dogged his footsteps.

With Billy's behavior toward himself, Bertram could find no fault. She was always her sweet, loyal, lovable self, eager to hear of his work, earnestly solicitous that it should be a success. She even — as he sometimes half-irritably remembered — had once told him that she realized he belonged to Art before he did to himself; and when he had indignantly denied this, she had only laughed and thrown a kiss at him, with the remark that he ought to hear his sister Kate's opinion of that matter. As if he wanted Kate's opinion on that or anything else that concerned him and Billy!

Once, torn by jealousy, and exasperated at the frequent interruptions of their quiet hours together, he had complained openly.

"Actually, Billy, it's worse than Marie's wedding," he declared. "*Then* it was tablecloths and napkins that could be dumped in a chair. *Now* it's a girl who wants to rehearse, or a woman that wants a different wig, or a telephone message that the sopranos have quarrelled again. I loathe that operetta!"

Billy laughed, but she frowned, too.

"I know, dear; I don't like that part. I wish they *would* let me alone when I'm with you! But as for the operetta, it is really a good thing, dear, and you'll say so when you see it. It's going to be a great success — I can say that because my part is only a small one, you know. We shall make lots of money for the Home, too, I'm sure."

"But you're wearing yourself all out with it, dear," scowled Bertram.

"Nonsense! I like it; besides, when I'm doing this I'm not telephoning you to come and amuse me. Just think what a lot of extra time you have for your work!"

"Don't want it," avowed Bertram.

"But the *work* may," retorted Billy, showing all her dimples. "Never mind, though; it'll all be over after the twentieth. *This* isn't an understudy like Marie's wedding, you know," she finished demurely.

"Thank heaven for that!" Bertram had

breathed fervently. But even as he said the words he grew sick with fear. What if, after all, this *were* an understudy to what was to come later when Music, his rival, had really conquered?

Bertram knew that however secure might seem Billy's affection for himself, there was still in his own mind a horrid fear lest underneath that security were an unconscious, growing fondness for something he could not give, for some one that he was not — a fondness that would one day cause Billy to awake. As Bertram, in his morbid fancy pictured it, he realized only too well what that awakening would mean to himself.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ARTIST AND HIS ART

THE private view of the paintings and drawings of the Brush and Pencil Club on the evening of the fifteenth was a great success. Society sent its fairest women in frocks that were pictures in themselves. Art sent its severest critics and its most ardent devotees. The Press sent reporters that the World might know what Art and Society were doing, and how they did it.

Before the canvases signed with Bertram Henshaw's name there was always to be found an admiring group representing both Art and Society with the Press on the outskirts to report. William Henshaw, coming unobserved upon one such group, paused a moment to smile at the various more or less disconnected comments.

"What a lovely blue!"

"Marvellous color sense!"

"Now those shadows are —"

"He gets his high lights so —"

"I declare, she looks just like Blanche Payton!"

"Every line there is full of meaning."

"I suppose it's very fine, but — "

"Now, I say, Henshaw is — "

"Is this by the man that's painting Margy Winthrop's portrait? "

"It's idealism, man, idealism! "

"I'm going to have a dress just that shade of blue."

"Isn't that just too sweet! "

"Now for realism, I consider Henshaw — "

"There aren't many with his sensitive, brilliant touch."

"Oh, what a pretty picture! "

William moved on then.

Billy was rapturously proud of Bertram that evening. He was, of course, the centre of congratulations and hearty praise. At his side, Billy, with sparkling eyes, welcomed each smiling congratulation and gloried in every commendatory word she heard.

"Oh, Bertram, isn't it splendid! I'm so proud of you," she whispered softly, when a moment's lull gave her opportunity.

"They're all words, words, idle words," he laughed; but his eyes shone.

"Just as if they weren't all true! " she bridled, turning to greet William, who came up at that moment. "Isn't it fine, Uncle William? " she beamed. "And aren't we proud of him? "

"We are, indeed," smiled the man. "But if you and Bertram want to get the real opinion of this crowd, you should go and stand near one of his pictures five minutes. As a sort of crazy-quilt criticism it can't be beat."

"I know," laughed Bertram. "I've done it, in days long gone."

"Bertram, not really?" cried Billy.

"Sure! As if every young artist at the first didn't don goggles or a false mustache and study the pictures on either side of his own till he could paint them with his eyes shut!"

"And what did you hear?" demanded the girl.

"What didn't I hear?" laughed her lover. "But I didn't do it but once or twice. I lost my head one day and began to argue the question of perspective with a couple of old codgers who were criticizing a bit of foreshortening that was my special pet. I forgot my goggles and sailed in. The game was up then, of course; and I never put them on again. But it was worth a farm to see their faces when I stood 'discovered' — as the stage-folk say."

"Serves you right, sir — listening like that," scolded Billy.

Bertram laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it cured me, anyhow. I haven't done it since," he declared.

It was some time later, on the way home, that Bertram said:

"It was gratifying, of course, Billy, and I liked it. It would be absurd to say I didn't like the many pleasant words of apparently sincere appreciation I heard to-night. But I couldn't help thinking of the next time — always the next time."

"The next time?" Billy's eyes were slightly puzzled.

"That I exhibit, I mean. The Bohemian Ten hold their exhibition next month, you know. I shall show just one picture — the portrait of Miss Winthrop."

"Oh, Bertram!"

"It'll be 'Oh, Bertram!' then, dear, if it isn't a success," he sighed. "I don't believe you realize yet what that thing is going to mean for me."

"Well, I should think I might," retorted Billy, a little tremulously, "after all I've heard about it. I should think *everybody* knew you were doing it, Bertram. Actually, I'm not sure Marie's scrub-lady won't ask me some day how Mr. Bertram's picture is coming on!"

"That's the dickens of it, in a way," sighed Bertram, with a faint smile. "I am amazed — and a little frightened, I'll admit — at the universality of the interest. You see, the Winthrops

have been pleased to spread it, for one reason or another, and of course many already know of the failures of Anderson and Fullam. That's why, if I should fail — "

"But you aren't going to fail," interposed the girl, resolutely.

"No, I know I'm not. I only said 'if,'" fenced the man, his voice not quite steady.

"There isn't going to be any 'if,'" settled Billy. "Now tell me, when is the exhibition?"

"March twentieth — the private view. Mr. Winthrop is not only willing, but anxious, that I show it. I wasn't sure that he'd want me to — in an exhibition. But it seems he does. His daughter says he has every confidence in the portrait and wants everybody to see it."

"That's where he shows his good sense," declared Billy. Then, with just a touch of constraint, she asked: "And how is the new, latest pose coming on?"

"Very well, I think," answered Bertram, a little hesitatingly. "We've had so many, many interruptions, though, that it is surprising how slow it is moving. In the first place, Miss Winthrop is gone more than half the time (she goes again to-morrow for a week!), and in this portrait I'm not painting a stroke without my model before me. I mean to take no chances, you see; and Miss

Winthrop is perfectly willing to give me all the sittings I wish for. Of course, if she hadn't changed the pose and costume so many times, it would have been done long ago — and she knows it."

"Of course — she knows it," murmured Billy, a little faintly, but with a peculiar intonation in her voice.

"And so you see," sighed Bertram, "what the twentieth of March is going to mean for me."

"It's going to mean a splendid triumph!" asserted Billy; and this time her voice was not faint, and it carried only a ring of loyal confidence.

"You blessed comforter!" murmured Bertram, giving with his eyes the caress that his lips would so much have preferred to give — under more propitious circumstances.

CHAPTER XXV

THE OPERETTA

THE sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth of February were, for Billy, and for all concerned in the success of the operetta, days of hurry, worry, and feverish excitement, as was to be expected, of course. Each afternoon and every evening saw rehearsals in whole, or in parts. A friend of the Club-president's sister-in-law — a woman whose husband was stage manager of a Boston theatre — had consented to come and "coach" the performers. At her appearance the performers — promptly thrown into nervous spasms by this fearsome nearness to the "real thing" — forgot half their cues, and conducted themselves generally like frightened school children on "piece day," much to their own and every one else's despair. Then, on the evening of the nineteenth, came the final dress rehearsal on the stage of the pretty little hall that had been engaged for the performance of the operetta.

The dress rehearsal, like most of its kind, was, for every one, nothing but a nightmare of discord,

discouragement, and disaster. Everybody's nerves were on edge, everybody was sure the thing would be a "flat failure." The soprano sang off the key, the alto forgot to shriek "Beware, beware!" until it was so late there was nothing to beware of; the basso stepped on Billy's trailing frock and tore it; even the tenor, Arkwright himself, seemed to have lost every bit of vim from his acting. The chorus sang "Oh, be joyful!" with dirge-like solemnity, and danced as if legs and feet were made of wood. The lovers, after the fashion of amateur actors from time immemorial, "made love like sticks."

Billy, when the dismal thing had dragged its way through the final note, sat "down front," crying softly in the semi-darkness while she was waiting for Alice Greggory to "run it through just once more" with a pair of tired-faced, fluffy-skirted fairies who could *not* learn that a duet meant a *duet* — not two solos, independently hurried or retarded as one's fancy for the moment dictated.

To Billy, just then, life did not look to be even half worth the living. Her head ached, her throat was going-to-be-sore, her shoe hurt, and her dress — the trailing frock that had been under the basso's foot — could not possibly be decently repaired before to-morrow night, she was sure.

Bad as these things were, however, they were only the intimate, immediate woes. Beyond and around them lay others — many others. To be sure, Bertram and happiness were supposed to be somewhere in the dim and uncertain future; but between her and them lay all these other woes, chief of which was the unutterable tragedy of to-morrow night.

It was to be a failure, of course. Billy had calmly made up her mind to that, now. But then, she was used to failures, she told herself. Was she not plainly failing every day of her life to bring about even friendship between Alice Greggory and Arkwright? Did they not emphatically and systematically refuse to be "thrown together," either naturally, or unnaturally? And yet — whenever again could she expect such opportunities to further her Cause as had been hers the past few weeks, through the operetta and its rehearsals? Certainly, never again! It had been a failure like all the rest; like the operetta, in particular.

Billy did not mean that any one should know she was crying. She supposed that all the performers except herself and the two earth-bound fairies by the piano with Alice Greggory were gone. She knew that John with Peggy was probably waiting at the door outside, and she hoped that

soon the fairies would decide to go home and go to bed, and let other people do the same. For her part, she did not see why they were struggling so hard, anyway. Why needn't they go ahead and sing their duet like two solos if they wanted to? As if a little thing like that could make a feather's weight of difference in the grand total of to-morrow night's wretchedness when the final curtain should have been rung down on their shame!

"Miss Neilson, you aren't — crying!" exclaimed a low voice; and Billy turned to find Arkwright standing by her side in the dim light.

"Oh, no — yes — well, maybe I was, a little," stammered Billy, trying to speak very unconcernedly. "How warm it is in here! Do you think it's going to rain? — that is, outdoors, of course, I mean."

Arkwright dropped into the seat behind Billy and leaned forward, his eyes striving to read the girl's half-averted face. If Billy had turned, she would have seen that Arkwright's own face showed white and a little drawn-looking in the feeble rays from the light by the piano. But Billy did not turn. She kept her eyes steadily averted; and she went on speaking — airy, inconsequential words.

"Dear me, if those girls *would* only pull to-

gether! But then, what's the difference? I supposed you had gone home long ago, Mr. Arkwright."

"Miss Neilson, you *are* crying!" Arkwright's voice was low and vibrant. "As if anything or anybody in the world *could* make *you* cry! Please — you have only to command me, and I will sally forth at once to slay the offender." His words were light, but his voice still shook with emotion.

Billy gave an hysterical little giggle. Angrily she brushed the persistent tears from her eyes.

"All right, then; I'll dub you my Sir Knight," she faltered. "But I'll warn you — you'll have your hands full. You'll have to slay my headache, and my throat-ache, and my shoe that hurts, and the man who stepped on my dress, and — and everybody in the operetta, including myself."

"Everybody — in the operetta!" Arkwright did look a little startled, at this wholesale slaughter.

"Yes. Did you ever see such an awful, awful thing as that was to-night?" moaned the girl.

Arkwright's face relaxed.

"Oh, so *that's* what it is!" he laughed lightly. "Then it's only a bogy of fear that I've got to slay, after all; and I'll despatch that right now with a single blow. Dress rehearsals always go like that to-night. I've been in a dozen, and I

never yet saw one go half decent. Don't you worry. The worse the rehearsal, the better the performance, every time!"

Billy blinked off the tears and essayed a smile as she retorted:

"Well, if that's so, then ours to-morrow night ought to be a — a —"

"A corker," helped out Arkwright, promptly; "and it will be, too. You poor child, you're worn out; and no wonder! But don't worry another bit about the operetta. Now is there anything else I can do for you? Anything else I can slay?"

Billy laughed tremulously.

"N-no, thank you; not that you can — slay, I fancy," she sighed. "That is — not that you *will*," she amended wistfully, with a sudden remembrance of the Cause, for which he might do so much — if he only would.

Arkwright bent a little nearer. His breath stirred the loose, curling hair behind Billy's ear. His eyes had flashed into sudden fire.

"But you don't know what I'd do if I could," he murmured unsteadily. "If you'd let me tell you — if you only knew the wish that has lain closest to my heart for —"

"Miss Neilson, please," called the despairing voice of one of the earth-bound fairies; "Miss Neilson, you *are* there, aren't you?"

" Yes, I'm right here," answered Billy, wearily. Arkwright answered, too, but not aloud — which was wise.

" Oh dear! you're tired, I know," wailed the fairy, " but if you would please come and help us just a minute! Could you? "

" Why, yes, of course." Billy rose to her feet, still wearily.

Arkwright touched her arm. She turned and saw his face. It was very white — so white that her eyes widened in surprised questioning.

As if answering the unspoken words, the man shook his head.

" I can't, now, of course," he said. " But there *is* something I want to say — a story I want to tell you — after to-morrow, perhaps. May I? "

To Billy, the tremor of his voice, the suffering in his eyes, and the " story " he was begging to tell could have but one interpretation: Alice Greggory. Her face, therefore, was a glory of tender sympathy as she reached out her hand in farewell.

" Of course you may," she cried. " Come any time after to-morrow night, please," she smiled encouragingly, as she turned toward the stage.

Behind her, Arkwright stumbled twice as he walked up the incline toward the outer door — stumbled, not because of the semi-darkness of

the little theatre, but because of the blinding radiance of a girl's illumined face which he had, a moment before, read all unknowingly exactly wrong.

A little more than twenty-four hours later, Billy Neilson, in her own room, drew a long breath of relief. It was twelve o'clock on the night of the twentieth, and the operetta was over.

To Billy, life was eminently worth living to-night. Her head did not ache, her throat was not sore, her shoe did not hurt, her dress had been mended so successfully by Aunt Hannah, and with such comforting celerity, that long before night one would never have suspected the filmy thing had known the devastating tread of any man's foot. Better yet, the soprano had sung exactly to key, the alto had shrieked "Beware!" to thrilling purpose, Arkwright had shown all his old charm and vim, and the chorus had been prodigies of joyousness and marvels of lightness. Even the lovers had lost their stiffness, while the two earth-bound fairies of the night before had found so amiable a meeting point that their solos sounded, to the uninitiated, very like, indeed, a duet. The operetta was, in short, a glorious and gratifying success, both artistically and financially. Nor was this all that, to Billy, made life worth the living:

Arkwright had begged permission that evening to come up the following afternoon to tell her his "story"; and Billy, who was so joyously confident that this story meant the final crowning of her Cause with victory, had given happy consent.

Bertram was to come up in the evening, and Billy was anticipating that, too, particularly: it had been so long since they had known a really free, comfortable evening together, with nothing to interrupt. Doubtless, too, after Arkwright's visit of the afternoon, she would be in a position to tell Bertram the story of the suspended romance between Arkwright and Miss Greggory, and perhaps something, also, of her own efforts to bring the couple together again. On the whole, life did, indeed, look decidedly worth the living as Billy, with a contented sigh, turned over to go to sleep.

CHAPTER XXVI

ARKWRIGHT TELLS ANOTHER STORY

PROMPTLY at the suggested hour on the day after the operetta, Arkwright rang Billy Neilson's doorbell. Promptly, too, Billy herself came into the living-room to greet him.

Billy was in white to-day — a soft, creamy white wool with a touch of black velvet at her throat and in her hair. The man thought she had never looked so lovely: Arkwright was still under the spell wrought by the soft radiance of Billy's face the two times he had mentioned his "story."

Until the night before the operetta Arkwright had been more than doubtful of the way that story would be received, should he ever summon the courage to tell it. Since then his fears had been changed to rapturous hopes. It was very eagerly, therefore, that he turned now to greet Billy as she came into the room.

"Suppose we don't have any music to-day. Suppose we give the whole time up to the story," she smiled brightly, as she held out her hand.

Arkwright's heart leaped; but almost at once it throbbed with a vague uneasiness. He would have preferred to see her blush and be a little shy over that story. Still — there was a chance, of course, that she did not know what the story was. But if that were the case, what of the radiance in her face? What of — Finding himself in a tangled labyrinth that led apparently only to disappointment and disaster, Arkwright pulled himself up with a firm hand.

"You are very kind," he murmured, as he relinquished her fingers and seated himself near her. "You are sure, then, that you wish to hear the story?"

"Very sure," smiled Billy.

Arkwright hesitated. Again he longed to see a little embarrassment in the bright face opposite. Suddenly it came to him, however, that if Billy knew what he was about to say, it would manifestly not be her part to act as if she knew! With a lighter heart, then, he began his story.

"You want it from the beginning?"

"By all means! I never dip into books, nor peek at the ending. I don't think it's fair to the author."

"Then I will, indeed, begin at the beginning," smiled Arkwright, "for I'm specially anxious that you shall be — even more than 'fair' to

me." His voice shook a little, but he hurried on. "There's a — girl — in it; a very dear, lovely girl."

"Of course — if it's a nice story," twinkled Billy.

"And — there's a man, too. It's a love story, you see."

"Again of course — if it's interesting." Billy laughed mischievously, but she flushed a little.

"Still, the man doesn't amount to much, after all, perhaps. I might as well own up at the beginning — I'm the man."

"That will do for you to say, as long as you're telling the story," smiled Billy. "We'll let it pass for proper modesty on your part. But I shall say — the personal touch only adds to the interest."

Arkwright drew in his breath.

"We'll hope — it'll really be so," he murmured.

There was a moment's silence. Arkwright seemed to be hesitating what to say.

"Well?" prompted Billy, with a smile. "We have the hero and the heroine; now what happens next? Do you know," she added, "I have always thought that part must bother the story-writers — to get the couple to doing interesting things, after they'd got them introduced."

Arkwright sighed.

"Perhaps — on paper; but, you see, my story has been *lived*, so far. So it's quite different."

"Very well, then — what did happen?" smiled Billy.

"I was trying to think — of the first thing. You see it began with a picture, a photograph of the girl. Mother had it. I saw it, and wanted it, and —" Arkwright had started to say "and took it." But he stopped with the last two words unsaid. It was not time, yet, he deemed, to tell this girl how much that picture had been to him for so many months past. He hurried on a little precipitately. "You see, I had heard about this girl a lot; and I liked — what I heard."

"You mean — you didn't know her — at the first?" Billy's eyes were surprised. Billy had supposed that Arkwright had always known Alice Greggory.

"No, I didn't know the girl — till afterwards. Before that I was always dreaming and wondering what she would be like."

"Oh!" Billy subsided into her chair, still with the puzzled questioning in her eyes.

"Then I met her."

"Yes?"

"And she was everything and more than I had pictured her."

"And you fell in love at once?" Billy's voice had grown confident again.

"Oh, I was already in love," sighed Arkwright. "I simply sank deeper."

"Oh-h!" breathed Billy, sympathetically. "And the girl?"

"She didn't care — or know — for a long time. I'm not really sure she cares — or knows — even now." Arkwright's eyes were wistfully fixed on Billy's face.

"Oh, but you can't tell, always, about girls," murmured Billy, hurriedly. A faint pink had stolen to her forehead. She was thinking of Alice Greggory, and wondering if, indeed, Alice did care; and if she, Billy, might dare to assure this man — what she believed to be true — that his sweetheart was only waiting for him to come to her and tell her that he loved her.

Arkwright saw the color sweep to Billy's forehead, and took sudden courage. He leaned forward eagerly. A tender light came to his eyes. The expression on his face was unmistakable.

"Billy, do you mean, really, that there is — hope for me?" he begged brokenly.

Billy gave a visible start. A quick something like shocked terror came to her eyes. She drew back and would have risen to her feet had the thought not come to her that twice before she had

supposed a man was making love to her, when subsequent events proved that she had been mortifyingly mistaken: once when Cyril had told her of his love for Marie; and again when William had asked her to come back as a daughter to the house she had left desolate.

Telling herself sternly now not to be for the third time a "foolish little simpleton," she summoned all her wits, forced a cheery smile to her lips, and said:

"Well, really, Mr. Arkwright, of course I can't answer for the girl, so I'm not the one to give hope; and — "

"But you are the one," interrupted the man, passionately. "You're the only one! As if from the very first I hadn't loved you, and — "

"No, no, not that — not that! I'm mistaken! I'm not understanding what you mean," pleaded a horror-stricken voice. Billy was on her feet now, holding up two protesting hands, palms outward.

"Miss Neilson, you don't mean — that you haven't known — all this time — that it was you?" The man, now, was on his feet, his eyes hurt and unbelieving, looking into hers.

Billy paled. She began slowly to back away. Her eyes, still fixed on his, carried the shrinking terror of one who sees a horrid vision.

"But you know — you *must* know that I am not yours to win!" she reproached him sharply. "I'm to be Bertram Henshaw's — *wife*." From Billy's shocked young lips the word dropped with a ringing force that was at once accusatory and prohibitive. It was as if, by the mere utterance of the word, wife, she had drawn a sacred circle about her and placed herself in sanctuary.

From the blazing accusation in her eyes Arkwright fell back.

"Wife! You are to be Bertram Henshaw's wife!" he exclaimed. There was no mistaking the amazed incredulity on his face.

Billy caught her breath. The righteous indignation in her eyes fled, and a terrified appeal took its place.

"You don't mean that you *didn't — know?*" she faltered.

There was a moment's silence. A power quite outside herself kept Billy's eyes on Arkwright's face, and forced her to watch the change there from unbelief to belief, and from belief to set misery.

"No, I did not know," said the man then, dully, as he turned, rested his arm on the mantel behind him, and half shielded his face with his hand.

Billy sank into a low chair. Her fingers fluttered

nervously to her throat. Her piteous, beseeching eyes were on the broad back and bent head of the man before her.

"But I — I don't see how you could have helped — knowing," she stammered at last. "I don't see how such a thing could have happened — that you shouldn't know!"

"I've been trying to think, myself," returned the man, still in a dull, emotionless voice.

"It's been so — so much a matter of course. I supposed everybody knew it," maintained Billy.

"Perhaps that's just it — that it was so much a matter of course," rejoined the man. "You see, I know very few of your friends, anyway — who would be apt to mention it to me."

"But the announcements — oh, you weren't here then," moaned Billy. "But you must have known that — that he came here a good deal — that we were together so much!"

"To a certain extent, yes," sighed Arkwright. "But I took your friendship with him and his brothers as — as a matter of course. *That* was *my* 'matter of course,' you see," he went on bitterly. "I knew you were Mr. William Henshaw's namesake, and Calderwell had told me the story of your coming to them when you were left alone in the world. Calderwell had said, too,

that — " Arkwright paused, then hurried on a little constrainedly — " well, he said something that led me to think Mr. Bertram Henshaw was not a marrying man, anyway."

Billy winced and changed color. She had noticed the pause, and she knew very well what it was that Calderwell had said to occasion that pause. Must *always* she be reminded that no one expected Bertram Henshaw to love any girl — except to paint?

" But — but Mr. Calderwell must know about the engagement — now," she stammered.

" Very likely, but I have not happened to hear from him since my arrival in Boston. We do not correspond."

There was a long silence, then Arkwright spoke again.

" I think I understand now — many things. I wonder I did not see them before; but I never thought of Bertram Henshaw's being — If Calderwell hadn't said — " Again Arkwright stopped with his sentence half complete, and again Billy winced. " I've been a blind fool. I was so intent on my own — I've been a blind fool; that's all," repeated Arkwright, with a break in his voice.

Billy tried to speak, but instead of words, there came only a choking sob.

Arkwright turned sharply.

"Miss Neilson, don't — please," he begged. "There is no need that you should suffer — too."

"But I am so ashamed that such a thing *could* happen," she faltered. "I'm sure, some way, I must be to blame. But I never thought. I was blind, too. I was wrapped up in my own affairs. I never suspected. I never even *thought* to suspect! I thought of course you knew. It was just the music that brought us together, I supposed; and you were just like one of the family, anyway. I always thought of you as Aunt Hannah's — " She stopped with a vivid blush.

"As Aunt Hannah's niece, Mary Jane, of course," supplied Arkwright, bitterly, turning back to his old position. "And that was my own fault, too. My name, Miss Neilson, is Michael Jeremiah," he went on wearily, after a moment's hesitation, his voice showing his utter abandonment to despair. "When a boy at school I got heartily sick of the 'Mike' and the 'Jerry' and the even worse 'Tom and Jerry' that my young friends delighted in; so as soon as possible I sought obscurity and peace in 'M. J.' Much to my surprise and annoyance the initials proved to be little better, for they became at once the biggest sort of whet to people's curiosity. Naturally, the more determined persistent inquirers

were to know the name, the more determined I became that they shouldn't. All very silly and very foolish, of course. Certainly it seems so now," he finished.

Billy was silent. She was trying to find something, *anything*, to say, when Arkwright began speaking again, still in that dull, hopeless voice that Billy thought would break her heart.

"As for the 'Mary Jane' — that was another foolishness, of course. My small brothers and sisters originated it; others followed, on occasion, even Calderwell. Perhaps you did not know, but he was the friend who, by his laughing question, 'Why don't you, Mary Jane?' put into my head the crazy scheme of writing to Aunt Hannah and letting her think I was a real Mary Jane. You see what I stooped to do, Miss Neilson, for the chance of meeting and knowing you."

Billy gave a low cry. She had suddenly remembered the beginning of Arkwright's story. For the first time she realized that he had been talking then about herself, not Alice Greggory.

"But you don't mean that you — cared — that I was the — " She could not finish.

Arkwright turned from the mantel with a gesture of utter despair.

"Yes, I cared then. I had heard of you. I had sung your songs. I was determined to meet

you. So I came — and met you. After that I was more determined than ever to win you. Perhaps you see, now, why I was so blind to — to any other possibility. But it doesn't do any good — to talk like this. I understand now. Only, please, don't blame yourself," he begged as he saw her eyes fill with tears. The next moment he was gone.

Billy had turned away and was crying softly, so she did not see him go.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE THING THAT WAS THE TRUTH

BERTRAM called that evening. Billy had no story now to tell — nothing of the interrupted romance between Alice Greggory and Arkwright. Billy carefully, indeed, avoided mentioning Arkwright's name.

Ever since the man's departure that afternoon, Billy had been frantically trying to assure herself that she was not to blame; that she would not be supposed to know he cared for her; that it had all been as he said it was — his foolish blindness. But even when she had partially comforted herself by these assertions, she could not by any means escape the haunting vision of the man's stern-set, suffering face as she had seen it that afternoon; nor could she keep from weeping at the memory of the words he had said, and at the thought that never again could their pleasant friendship be quite the same — if, indeed, there could be any friendship at all between them.

But if Billy expected that her red eyes, pale

cheeks, and generally troubled appearance and unquiet manner were to be passed unnoticed by her lover's keen eyes that evening, she found herself much mistaken.

"Sweetheart, what *is* the matter?" demanded Bertram resolutely, at last, when his more indirect questions had been evasively turned aside. "You can't make me think there isn't something the trouble, because I know there is!"

"Well, then, there is, dear," smiled Billy, tearfully; "but please just don't let us talk of it. I — I want to forget it. Truly I do."

"But I want to know so *I* can forget it," persisted Bertram. "What is it? Maybe I could help."

She shook her head with a little frightened cry.

"No, no — you can't help — really."

"But, sweetheart, you don't know. Perhaps I could. Won't you *tell* me about it?"

Billy looked distressed.

"I can't, dear — truly. You see, it isn't quite mine — to tell."

"Not yours!"

"Not — entirely."

"But it makes you feel bad?"

"Yes — very."

"Then can't I know that part?"

"Oh, no — no, indeed, no! You see — it wouldn't be fair — to the other."

Bertram stared a little. Then his mouth set into stern lines.

"Billy, what are you talking about? Seems to me I have a right to know."

Billy hesitated. To her mind, a girl who would tell of the unrequited love of a man for herself, was unspeakably base. To tell Bertram Arkwright's love story was therefore impossible. Yet, in some way, she must set Bertram's mind at rest.

"Dearest," she began slowly, her eyes wistfully pleading, "just what it is, I can't tell you. In a way it's another's secret, and I don't feel that I have the right to tell it. It's just something that I learned this afternoon."

"But it has made you cry!"

"Yes. It made me feel very unhappy."

"Then — it was something you couldn't help?"

To Bertram's surprise, the face he was watching so intently flushed scarlet.

"No, I couldn't help it — now; though I might have — once." Billy spoke this last just above her breath. Then she went on, beseechingly: "Bertram, please, please don't talk of it any more. It — it's just spoiling our happy evening together!"

Bertram bit his lip, and drew a long sigh.

"All right, dear; you know best, of course — since I don't know *anything* about it," he finished a little stiffly.

Billy began to talk then very brightly of Aunt Hannah and her shawls, and of a visit she had made to Cyril and Marie that morning.

"And, do you know? Aunt Hannah's clock *has* done a good turn, at last, and justified its existence. Listen," she cried gayly. "Marie had a letter from her mother's Cousin Jane. Cousin Jane couldn't sleep nights, because she was always lying awake to find out just what time it was; so Marie had written her about Aunt Hannah's clock. And now this Cousin Jane has fixed *her* clock, and she sleeps like a top, just because she knows there'll never be but half an hour that she doesn't know what time it is!"

Bertram smiled, and murmured a polite "Well, I'm sure that's fine!"; but the words were plainly abstracted, and the frown had not left his brow. Nor did it quite leave till some time later, when Billy, in answer to a question of his about another operetta, cried, with a shudder:

"Mercy, I hope not, dear! I don't want to *hear* the word 'operetta' again for a year!"

Bertram smiled, then, broadly. He, too, would be quite satisfied not to hear the word

"operetta" for a year. Operetta, to Bertram, meant interruptions, interferences, and the constant presence of Arkwright, the Greggorys, and innumerable creatures who wished to rehearse or to change wigs — all of which Bertram abhorred. No wonder, therefore, that he smiled, and that the frown disappeared from his brow. He thought he saw, ahead, serene, blissful days for Billy and himself.

As the days, however, began to pass, one by one, Bertram Henshaw found them to be anything but serene and blissful. The operetta, with its rehearsals and its interruptions, was gone, certainly; but he was becoming seriously troubled about Billy.

Billy did not act natural. Sometimes she seemed like her old self; and he breathed more freely, telling himself that his fears were groundless. Then would come the haunting shadow to her eyes, the droop to her mouth, and the nervousness to her manner that he so dreaded. Worse yet, all this seemed to be connected in some strange way with Arkwright. He found this out by accident one day. She had been talking and laughing brightly about something, when he chanced to introduce Arkwright's name.

"By the way, where is Mary Jane these days?" he asked then.

"I don't know, I'm sure. He hasn't been here lately," murmured Billy, reaching for a book on the table.

At a peculiar something in her voice, he had looked up quickly, only to find, to his great surprise, that her face showed a painful flush as she bent over the book in her hand.

He had said nothing more at the time, but he had not forgotten. Several times, after that, he had introduced the man's name, and never had it failed to bring a rush of color, a biting of the lip, or a quick change of position followed always by the troubled eyes and nervous manner that he had learned to dread. He noticed then that never, of her own free will, did she herself mention the man; never did she speak of him with the old frank lightness as "Mary Jane."

By casual questions asked from time to time, Bertram had learned that Arkwright never came there now, and that the song-writing together had been given up. Curiously enough, this discovery, which would once have filled Bertram with joy, served now only to deepen his distress. That there was anything inconsistent in the fact that he was more frightened now at the man's absence than he had been before at his presence, did not occur to him. He knew only that he was frightened, and badly frightened.

Bertram had not forgotten the evening after the operetta, and Billy's tear-stained face on that occasion. He dated the whole thing, in fact, from that evening. He fell to wondering one day if that, too, had anything to do with Arkwright. He determined then to find out. Shamelessly — for the good of the cause — he set a trap for Billy's unwary feet.

Very adroitly one day he led the talk straight to Arkwright; then he asked abruptly:

"Where is the chap, I wonder! Why, he hasn't shown up once since the operetta, has he?"

Billy, always truthful, — and just now always embarrassed when Arkwright's name was mentioned, — walked straight into the trap.

"Oh, yes; well, he was here once — the day after the operetta. I haven't seen him since."

Bertram answered a light something, but his face grew a little white. Now that the trap had been sprung and the victim caught, he almost wished that he had not set any trap at all.

He knew now it was true. Arkwright had been with Billy the day after the operetta, and her tears and her distress that evening had been caused by something Arkwright had said. It was Arkwright's secret that she could not tell. It was Arkwright to whom she must be fair. It was Arkwright's sorrow that she "could not help — now."

Naturally, with these tools in his hands, and aided by days of brooding and nights of sleeplessness, it did not take Bertram long to fashion The Thing that finally loomed before him as The Truth.

He understood it all now. Music had conquered. Billy and Arkwright had found that they loved each other. On the day after the operetta, they had met, and had had some sort of scene together — doubtless Arkwright had declared his love. That was the "secret" that Billy could not tell and be "fair." Billy, of course, — loyal little soul that she was, — had sent him away at once. Was her hand not already pledged? That was why she could not "help it — now." (Bertram writhed in agony at the thought.) Since that meeting Arkwright had not been near the house. Billy had found, however, that her heart had gone with Arkwright; hence the shadow in her eyes, the nervousness in her manner, and the embarrassment that she always showed at the mention of his name.

That Billy was still outwardly loyal to himself, and that she still kept to her engagement, did not surprise Bertram in the least. That was like Billy. Bertram had not forgotten how, less than a year before, this same Billy had held herself loyal and true to an engagement with William, because a wretched mistake all around had caused

her to give her promise to be William's wife under the impression that she was carrying out William's dearest wish. Bertram remembered her face as it had looked all those long summer days while her heart was being slowly broken; and he thought he could see that same look in her eyes now. All of which only goes to prove with what woeful skill Bertram had fashioned this Thing that was looming before him as The Truth.

The exhibition of "The Bohemian Ten" was to open with a private view on the evening of the twentieth of March. Bertram Henshaw's one contribution was to be his portrait of Miss Marguerite Winthrop — the piece of work that had come to mean so much to him; the piece of work upon which already he felt the focus of multitudes of eyes.

Miss Winthrop was in Boston now, and it was during these early March days that Bertram was supposed to be putting in his best work on the portrait; but, unfortunately, it was during these same early March days that he was engaged, also, in fashioning The Thing — and the two did not harmonize.

The Thing, indeed, was a jealous creature, and would brook no rival. She filled his eyes with horrid visions, and his brain with sickening thoughts. Between him and his model she flung

a veil of fear; and she set his hand to trembling, and his brush to making blunders with the paints on his palette.

Bertram saw The Thing, and saw, too, the grievous result of her presence. Despairingly he fought against her and her work; but The Thing had become full grown now, and was The Truth. Hence she was not to be banished. She even, in a taunting way, seemed sometimes to be justifying her presence, for she reminded him:

"After all, what's the difference? What do you care for this, or anything again — if Billy is lost to you?"

But the artist told himself fiercely that he did care — that he must care — for his work; and he struggled — how he struggled! — to ignore the horrid visions and the sickening thoughts, and to pierce the veil of fear so that his hand might be steady and his brush regain its skill.

And so he worked. Sometimes he let his work remain. Sometimes one hour saw only the erasing of what the hour before had wrought. Sometimes the elusive something in Marguerite Winthrop's face seemed right at the tip of his brush — on the canvas, even. He saw success then so plainly that for a moment it almost — but not quite — blotted out The Thing. At other times that elusive something on the high-bred face of his

model was a veritable will-o'-the-wisp, refusing to be caught and held, even in his eye. The artist knew then that his picture would be hung with Anderson's and Fullam's.

But the portrait was, irrefutably, nearing completion, and it was to be exhibited the twentieth of the month. Bertram knew these for facts.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BILLY TAKES HER TURN

If for Billy those first twenty days of March did not carry quite the tragedy they contained for Bertram, they were, nevertheless, not really happy ones. She was vaguely troubled by a curious something in Bertram's behavior that she could not name; she was grieved over Arkwright's sorrow, and she was constantly probing her own past conduct to see if anywhere she could find that she was to blame for that sorrow. She missed, too, undeniably, Arkwright's cheery presence, and the charm and inspiration of his music. Nor was she finding it easy to give satisfactory answers to the questions Aunt Hannah, William, and Bertram so often asked her as to where Mary Jane was.

Even her music was little comfort to her these days. She was not writing anything. There was no song in her heart to tempt her to write. Arkwright's new words that he had brought her were out of the question, of course. They had

been put away with the manuscript of the completed song, which had not, fortunately, gone to the publishers. Billy had waited, intending to send them together. She was so glad, now, that she had waited. Just once, since Arkwright's last call, she had tried to sing that song. But she had stopped at the end of the first two lines. The full meaning of those words, as coming from Arkwright, had swept over her then, and she had snatched up the manuscript and hidden it under the bottom pile of music in her cabinet . . . And she had presumed to sing that love song to Bertram!

Arkwright had written Billy once — a kind, courteous, manly note that had made her cry. He had begged her again not to blame herself, and he had said that he hoped he should be strong enough sometime to wish to call occasionally — if she were willing — and renew their pleasant hours with their music; but, for the present, he knew there was nothing for him to do but to stay away. He had signed himself "Michael Jeremiah Arkwright"; and to Billy that was the most pathetic thing in the letter — it sounded so hopeless and dreary to one who knew the jaunty "M. J."

Alice Greggory, Billy saw frequently. Billy and Aunt Hannah were great friends with the

Greggorys now, and had been ever since the Greggorys' ten-days' visit at Hillside. The cheery little cripple, with the gentle tap, tap, tap of her crutches, had won everybody's heart the very first day; and Alice was scarcely less of a favorite, after the sunny friendliness of Hillside had thawed her stiff reserve into naturalness.

Billy had little to say to Alice Greggory of Arkwright. Billy was no longer trying to play Cupid's assistant. The Cause, for which she had so valiantly worked, had been felled by Arkwright's own hand — but that there were still some faint stirrings of life in it was evidenced by Billy's secret delight when one day Alice Greggory chanced to mention that Arkwright had called the night before upon her and her mother.

"He brought us news of our old home," she explained a little hurriedly, to Billy. "He had heard from his mother, and he thought some things she said would be interesting to us."

"Of course," murmured Billy, carefully excluding from her voice any hint of the delight she felt, but hoping, all the while, that Alice would continue the subject.

Alice, however, had nothing more to say; and Billy was left in entire ignorance of what the news was that Arkwright had brought. She suspected, though, that it had something to do with Alice's

father — certainly she hoped that it had; for if Arkwright had called to tell it, it must be good.

Billy had found a new home for the Greggorys; although at first they had drawn sensitively back, and had said that they preferred to remain where they were, they had later gratefully accepted it. A little couple from South Boston, to whom Billy had given a two weeks' outing the summer before, had moved into town and taken a flat in the South End. They had two extra rooms which they had told Billy they would like to let for light housekeeping, if only they knew just the right people to take into such close quarters with themselves. Billy at once thought of the Greggorys, and spoke of them. The little couple were delighted, and the Greggorys were scarcely less so when they at last became convinced that only a very little more money than they were already paying would give themselves a much pleasanter home, and would at the same time be a real boon to two young people who were trying to meet expenses. So the change was made, and general happiness all round had resulted — so much so, that Bertram had said to Billy, when he heard of it:

"It looks as if this was a case where your cake is frosted on both sides."

"Nonsense! This isn't frosting — it's business," Billy had laughed.

"And the new pupils you have found for Miss Alice — they're business, too, I suppose?"

"Certainly," retorted Billy, with decision. Then she had given a low laugh and said: "Mercy! If Alice Greggory thought it was anything *but* business, I verily believe she would refuse every one of the new pupils, and begin to-night to carry back the tables and chairs herself to those wretched rooms she left last month!"

Bertram had smiled, but the smile had been a fleeting one, and the brooding look of gloom that Billy had noticed so frequently, of late, had come back to his eyes.

Billy was not a little disturbed over Bertram these days. He did not seem to be his natural, cheery self at all. He talked little, and what he did say seldom showed a trace of his usually whimsical way of putting things. He was kindness itself to her, and seemed particularly anxious to please her in every way; but she frequently found his eyes fixed on her with a sombre questioning that almost frightened her. The more she thought of it, the more she wondered what the question was, that he did not dare to ask; and whether it was of herself or himself that he would ask it — if he did dare. Then, with benumbing force, one day, a possible solution of the mystery came to her: he had found out that it was true

(what all his friends had declared of him) — he did not really love any girl, except to paint!

The minute this thought came to her, Billy thrust it indignantly away. It was disloyal to Bertram and unworthy of herself, even to think such a thing. She told herself then that it was only the portrait of Miss Winthrop that was troubling him. She knew that he was worried over that. He had confessed to her that actually sometimes he was beginning to fear his hand had lost its cunning. As if that were not enough to bring the gloom to any man's face — to any artist's!

No sooner, however, had Billy arrived at this point in her mental argument, than a new element entered — her old lurking jealousy, of which she was heartily ashamed, but which she had never yet been able quite to subdue; her jealousy of the beautiful girl with the beautiful name (not Billy), whose portrait had needed so much time and so many sittings to finish. What if Bertram had found that he loved *her?* What if that were why his hand had lost its cunning — because, though loving her, he realized that he was bound to another, Billy herself?

This thought, too, Billy cast from her at once as again disloyal and unworthy. But both thoughts, having once entered her brain, had made for them-

selves roads over which the second passing was much easier than the first — as Billy found to her sorrow. Certainly, as the days went by, and as Bertram's face and manner became more and more a tragedy of suffering, Billy found it increasingly difficult to keep those thoughts from wearing their roads of suspicion into horrid deep ruts of certainty.

Only with William and Marie, now, could Billy escape from it all. With William she sought new curios and catalogued the old. With Marie she beat eggs and whipped cream in the shining kitchen, and tried to think that nothing in the world mattered except that the cake in the oven should not fall.

CHAPTER XXIX

KATE WRITES A LETTER

BERTRAM feared that he knew, before the portrait was hung, that it was a failure. He was sure that he knew it on the evening of the twentieth when he encountered the swiftly averted eyes of some of his artist friends, and saw the perplexed frown on the faces of others. But he knew, afterwards, that he did not really know it — till he read the newspapers during the next few days.

There was praise — oh, yes; the faint praise that kills. There was some adverse criticism, too; but it was of the light, insincere variety that is given to mediocre work by unimportant artists. Then, here and there, appeared the signed critiques of the men whose opinion counted — and Bertram knew that he had failed. Neither as a work of art, nor as a likeness, was the portrait the success that Henshaw's former work would seem to indicate that it should have been. Indeed, as one caustic pen put it, if this were to be taken

as a sample of what was to follow — then the famous originator of "The Face of a Girl" had "a most distinguished future behind him."

Seldom, if ever before, had an exhibited portrait attracted so much attention. As Bertram had said, uncounted eyes were watching for it before it was hung, because it was a portrait of the noted beauty, Marguerite Winthrop, and because two other well-known artists had failed where he, Bertram Henshaw, was hoping to succeed. After it was hung, and the uncounted eyes had seen it — either literally, or through the eyes of the critics — interest seemed rather to grow than to lessen, for other uncounted eyes wanted to see what all the fuss was about, anyway. And when these eyes had seen, their owners talked. Nor did they, by any means, all talk against the portrait. Some were as loud in its praise as were others in its condemnation; all of which, of course, but helped to attract more eyes to the cause of it all.

For Bertram and his friends these days were, naturally, trying ones. William finally dreaded to open his newspaper. (It had become the fashion, when murders and divorces were scarce, occasionally to "feature" somebody's opinion of the Henshaw portrait, on the first page — something that had almost never been known to happen be-

fore.) Cyril, according to Marie, played "perfectly awful things on his piano every day, now." Aunt Hannah had said "Oh, my grief and conscience!" so many times that it melted now into a wordless groan whenever a new unfriendly criticism of the portrait met her indignant eyes.

Of all Bertram's friends, Billy, perhaps not unnaturally, was the angriest. Not only did she, after a time, refuse to read the papers, but she refused even to allow certain ones to be brought into the house, foolish and unreasonable as she knew this to be.

As to the artist himself, Bertram's face showed drawn lines and his eyes sombre shadows, but his words and manner carried a stolid indifference that to Billy was at once heartbreaking and maddening.

"But, Bertram, why don't you do something? Why don't you say something? Why don't you act something?" she burst out one day.

The artist shrugged his shoulders.

"But, my dear, what can I say, or do, or act?" he asked.

"I don't know, of course," sighed Billy. "But I know what I'd like to do. I should like to go out and — fight somebody!"

So fierce were words and manner, coupled as they were with a pair of gentle eyes ablaze and

two soft little hands doubled into menacing fists, that Bertram laughed.

"What a fiery little champion it is, to be sure," he said tenderly. "But as if fighting could do any good — in this case!"

Billy's tense muscles relaxed. Her eyes filled with tears.

"No, I don't suppose it would," she choked, beginning to cry, so that Bertram had to turn comforter.

"Come, come, dear," he begged; "don't take it so to heart. It's not so bad, after all. I've still my good right hand left, and we'll hope there's something in it yet — that'll be worth while."

"But *this* one isn't bad," stormed Billy. "It's splendid! I'm sure, I think it's a b-beautiful portrait, and I don't see *what* people mean by talking so about it!"

Bertram shook his head. His eyes grew sombre again.

"Thank you, dear. But I know — and you know, really — that it isn't a splendid portrait. I've done lots better work than that."

"Then why don't they look at those, and let this alone?" wailed Billy, with indignation.

"Because I deliberately put up this for them to see," smiled the artist, wearily.

Billy sighed, and twisted in her chair.

"What does — Mr. Winthrop say?" she asked at last, in a faint voice.

Bertram lifted his head.

"Mr. Winthrop's been a trump all through, dear. He's already insisted on paying for this — and he's ordered another."

"Another!"

"Yes. The old fellow never minces his words, as you may know. He came to me one day, put his hand on my shoulder, and said tersely: 'Will you give me another, same terms? Go in, boy, and win. Show 'em! I lost the first ten thousand I made. I didn't the next!' That's all he said. Before I could even choke out an answer he was gone. Gorry! talk about his having a 'heart of stone'! I don't believe another man in the country would have done that — and done it in the way he did — in the face of all this talk," finished Bertram, his eyes luminous with feeling.

Billy hesitated.

"Perhaps — his daughter — influenced him — some."

"Perhaps," nodded Bertram. "She, too, has been very kind, all the way through."

Billy hesitated again.

"But I thought — it was going so splendidly," she faltered, in a half-stifled voice.

"So it was — at the first."

"Then what — ailed it, at the last, do you suppose?" Billy was holding her breath till he should answer.

The man got to his feet.

"Billy, don't — don't ask me," he begged. "Please don't let's talk of it any more. It can't do any good! I just flunked — that's all. My hand failed me. Maybe I tried too hard. Maybe I was tired. Maybe something — troubled me. Never mind, dear, what it was. It can do no good even to think of that — now. So just let's — drop it, please, dear," he finished, his face working with emotion.

And Billy dropped it — so far as words were concerned; but she could not drop it from her thoughts — specially after Kate's letter came.

Kate's letter was addressed to Billy, and it said, after speaking of various other matters:

"And now about poor Bertram's failure." (Billy frowned. In Billy's presence no one was allowed to say "Bertram's failure"; but a letter has a most annoying privilege of saying what it pleases without let or hindrance, unless one tears it up — and a letter destroyed unread remains always such a tantalizing mystery of possibilities! So Billy let the letter talk.) "Of course we have heard of it away out here. I do wish if Bertram

must paint such famous people, he would manage to flatter them up — in the painting, I mean, of course — enough so that it might pass for a success!

" The technical part of all this criticism I don't pretend to understand in the least; but from what I hear and read, he must, indeed, have made a terrible mess of it, and of course I'm very sorry — and some surprised, too, for usually he paints such pretty pictures!

" Still, on the other hand, Billy, I'm not surprised. William says that Bertram has been completely out of fix over something, and as gloomy as an owl, for weeks past; and of course, under those circumstances, the poor boy could not be expected to do good work. Now William, being a man, is not supposed to understand what the trouble is. But I, being a woman, can see through a pane of glass when it's held right up before me; and I can guess, of course, that a woman is at the bottom of it — she always is! — and that you, being his special fancy at the moment " (Billy almost did tear the letter now — but not quite), " are that woman.

" Now, Billy, you don't like such frank talk, of course; but, on the other hand, I know you do not want to ruin the dear boy's career. So, for heaven's sake, if you two have been having one of those

quarrels that lovers so delight in — do, please, for the good of the cause, make up quick, or else quarrel harder and break it off entirely — which, honestly, would be the better way, I think, all around.

" There, there, my dear child, don't bristle up! I am very fond of you, and would dearly love to have you for a sister — if you'd only take William, as you should! But, as you very well know, I never did approve of this last match at all, for either of your sakes.

" He can't make you happy, my dear, and you can't make him happy. Bertram never was — and never will be — a marrying man. He's too temperamental — too thoroughly wrapped up in his Art. Girls have never meant anything to him but a beautiful picture to paint. And they never will. They can't. He's made that way. Listen! I can prove it to you. Up to this winter he's always been a care-free, happy, jolly fellow, and you *know* what beautiful work he has done. Never before has he tied himself to any one girl till last fall. Then you two entered into this absurd engagement.

" Now what has it been since? William wrote me himself not a fortnight ago that he'd been worried to death over Bertram for weeks past, he's been so moody, so irritable, so fretted over his work, so unlike himself. And his picture has

failed dismally. Of course William doesn't understand; but I do. I know you've probably quarrelled, or something. You know how flighty and unreliable you can be sometimes, Billy, and I don't say that to mean anything against you, either — that's *your* way. You're just as temperamental in your art, music, as Bertram is in his. You're utterly unsuited to him. If Bertram is to marry *anybody*, it should be some quiet, staid, sensible girl who would be a *help* to him. But when I think of you two flyaway flutterbudgets marrying — !

"Now, for heaven's sake, Billy, *do* make up or something — and do it now. Don't, for pity's sake, let Bertram ever put out another such a piece of work to shame us all like this. Do you want to ruin his career?

"Faithfully yours,

"KATE HARTWELL.

"P. S. *I* think William's the one for you. He's devoted to you, and his quiet, sensible affection is just what your temperament needs. I *always* thought William was the one for you. Think it over.

"P. S. No. 2. You can see by the above that it isn't *you* I'm objecting to, my dear. It's just *you-and-Bertram*. K."

CHAPTER XXX

"I'VE HINDERED HIM"

BILLY was shaking with anger and terror by the time she had finished reading Kate's letter. Anger was uppermost at the moment, and with one sweeping wrench of her trembling fingers she tore the closely written sheets straight through the middle, and flung them into the little wicker basket by her desk. Then she went down-stairs and played her noisiest, merriest Tarantella, and tried to see how fast she could make her fingers fly.

But Billy could not, of course, play tarantellas all day; and even while she did play them she could not forget that waste-basket up-stairs, and the horror it contained. The anger was still uppermost, but the terror was prodding her at every turn, and demanding to know just what it was that Kate had written in that letter, anyway. It is not strange then, perhaps, that before two hours passed, Billy went up-stairs, took the letter from the basket, matched together the torn

half-sheets and forced her shrinking eyes to read every word again — just to satisfy that terror which would not be silenced.

At the end of the second reading, Billy reminded herself with stern calmness that it was only Kate, after all; that nobody ought to mind what Kate said; that certainly *she*, Billy, ought not — after the experience she had already had with her unpleasant interference! Kate did not know what she was talking about, anyway. This was only another case of her trying "to manage." She did so love to manage — everything!

At this point Billy got out her pen and paper and wrote to Kate.

It was a formal, cold little letter, not at all the sort that Billy's friends usually received. It thanked Kate for her advice, and for her "kind willingness" to have Billy for a sister; but it hinted that perhaps Kate did not realize that as long as Billy was the one who would have to *live* with the chosen man, it would be pleasanter to take the one Billy loved, which happened in this case to be Bertram — not William. As for any "quarrel" being the cause of whatever fancied trouble there was with the new picture — the letter scouted that idea in no uncertain terms. There had been no suggestion of a quarrel even once since the engagement.

Then Billy signed her name and took the letter out to post immediately.

For the first few minutes after the letter had been dropped into the green box at the corner, Billy held her head high, and told herself that the matter was now closed. She had sent Kate a courteous, dignified, conclusive, effectual answer; and she thought with much satisfaction of the things she had said.

Very soon, however, she began to think — not so much of what *she* had said — but of what Kate had said. Many of Kate's sentences were unpleasantly vivid in her mind. They seemed, indeed, to stand out in letters of flame, and they began to burn, and burn, and burn. These were some of them:

"William says that Bertram has been completely out of fix over something, and as gloomy as an owl for weeks past."

"A woman is at the bottom of it — . . . you are that woman."

"You can't make him happy."

"Bertram never was — and never will be — a marrying man."

"Girls have never meant anything to him but a beautiful picture to paint. And they never will."

"Up to this winter he's always been a care-

free, happy, jolly fellow, and you *know* what beautiful work he has done. Never before has he tied himself to any one girl until last fall."

"Now what has it been since?"

"He's been so moody, so irritable, so fretted over his work, so unlike himself; and his picture has failed, dismally."

"Do you want to ruin his career?"

Billy began to see now that she had not really answered Kate's letter at all. The matter was not closed. Her reply had been, perhaps, courteous and dignified — but it had not been conclusive nor effectual.

Billy had reached home now, and she was crying. Bertram *had* acted strangely, of late. Bertram *had* seemed troubled over something. His picture *had* — With a little shudder Billy tossed aside these thoughts, and dug at her teary eyes with a determined hand. Fiercely she told herself that the matter *was* settled. Very scornfully she declared that it was "only Kate," after all, and that she *would not* let Kate make her unhappy again! Forthwith she picked up a current magazine and began to read.

As it chanced, however, even here Billy found no peace; for the first article she opened to was headed in huge black type:

"MARRIAGE AND THE ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT."

With a little cry Billy flung the magazine far from her, and picked up another. But even "The Elusiveness of Chopin," which she found here, could not keep her thoughts nor her eyes from wandering to the discarded thing in the corner, lying ignominiously face down with crumpled, out-flung leaves.

Billy knew that in the end she should go over and pick that magazine up, and read that article from beginning to end. She was not surprised, therefore, when she did it — but she was not any the happier for having done it.

The writer of the article did not approve of marriage and the artistic temperament. He said the artist belonged to his Art, and to posterity through his Art. The essay fairly bristled with many-lettered words and high-sounding phrases, few of which Billy really understood. She did understand enough, however, to feel, guiltily, when the thing was finished, that already she had married Bertram, and by so doing had committed a Crime. She had slain Art, stifled Ambition, destroyed Inspiration, and been a nuisance generally. In consequence of which Bertram would henceforth and forevermore be doomed to Littleness.

Naturally, in this state of mind, and with this vision before her, Billy was anything but her bright, easy self when she met Bertram an hour or two later. Naturally, too, Bertram, still the tormented victim of the bugaboo his jealous fears had fashioned, was just in the mood to place the worst possible construction on his sweetheart's very evident unhappiness. With sighs, unspoken questions, and frequently averted eyes, therefore, the wretched evening passed, a pitiful misery to them both.

During the days that followed, Billy thought that the world itself must be in league with Kate, so often did she encounter Kate's letter masquerading under some thin disguise. She did not stop to realize that because she was so afraid she *would* find it, she *did* find it. In the books she read, in the plays she saw, in the chance words she heard spoken by friend or stranger — always there was something to feed her fears in one way or another. Even in a yellowed newspaper that had covered the top shelf in her closet she found one day a symposium on whether or not an artist's wife should be an artist; and she shuddered — but she read every opinion given.

Some writers said no, and some, yes; and some said it all depended — on the artist and his wife. Billy found much food for thought, some for

amusement, and a little that made for peace of mind. On the whole it opened up a new phase of the matter, perhaps. At all events, upon finishing it she almost sobbed:

"One would think that just because I write a song now and then, I was going to let Bertram starve, and go with holes in his socks and no buttons on his clothes!"

It was that afternoon that Billy went to see Marie; but even there she did not escape, for the gentle Marie all unknowingly added her mite to the woeful whole.

Billy found Marie in tears.

"Why, Marie!" she cried in dismay.

"Sh-h!" warned Marie, turning agonized eyes toward the closed door of Cyril's den.

"But, dear, what is it?" begged Billy, with no less dismay, but with greater caution.

"Sh-h!" admonished Marie again.

On tiptoe, then, she led the way to a room at the other end of the tiny apartment. Once there, she explained in a more natural tone of voice:

"Cyril's at work on a new piece for the piano."

"Well, what if he is?" demanded Billy. "That needn't make you cry, need it?"

"Oh, no — no, indeed," demurred Marie, in a shocked voice.

"Well, then, what is it?"

Marie hesitated; then, with the abandon of a hurt child that longs for sympathy, she sobbed:

"It — it's just that I'm afraid, after all, that I'm not good enough for Cyril."

Billy stared frankly.

"Not *good* enough, Marie Henshaw! Whatever in the world do you mean?"

"Well, not good *for* him, then. Listen! To-day, I know, in lots of ways I must have disappointed him. First, he put on some socks that I'd darned. They were the first since our marriage that I'd found to darn, and I'd been so proud and — and happy while I *was* darning them. But — but he took 'em off right after breakfast and threw 'em in a corner. Then he put on a new pair, and said that I — I needn't darn any more; that it made — bunches. Billy, *my darns — bunches!*" Marie's face and voice were tragic.

"Nonsense, dear! Don't let that fret you," comforted Billy, promptly, trying not to laugh too hard. "It wasn't *your* darns; it was just darns — anybody's darns. Cyril won't wear darned socks. Aunt Hannah told me so long ago, and I said then there'd be a tragedy when *you* found it out. So don't worry over that."

"Oh, but that isn't all," moaned Marie. "Listen! You know how quiet he must have everything when he's composing — and he ought to

have it, too! But I forgot, this morning, and put on some old shoes that didn't have any rubber heels, and I ran the carpet sweeper, and I rattled tins in the kitchen. But I never thought a thing until he opened his door and asked me *please* to change my shoes and let the — the confounded dirt go, and didn't I have any dishes in the house but what were made of that abominable tin s-stuff," she finished in a wail of misery.

Billy burst into a ringing laugh, but Marie's aghast face and upraised hand speedily reduced it to a convulsive giggle.

"You dear child! Cyril's always like that when he's composing," soothed Billy. "I supposed you knew it, dear. Don't you fret! Run along and make him his favorite pudding, and by night both of you will have forgotten there ever were such things in the world as tins and shoes and carpet sweepers that clatter."

Marie shook her head. Her dismal face did not relax.

"You don't understand," she moaned. "It's myself. I've *hindered* him!" She brought out the word with an agony of slow horror. "And only to-day I read — here, look!" she faltered, going to the table and picking up with shaking hands a magazine.

Billy recognized it by the cover at once — an-

other like it had been flung not so long ago by her own hand into the corner. She was not surprised, therefore, to see very soon at the end of Marie's trembling finger:

"Marriage and the Artistic Temperament."

Billy did not give a ringing laugh this time. She gave an involuntary little shudder, though she tried valiantly to turn it all off with a light word of scorn, and a cheery pat on Marie's heaving shoulders. But she went home very soon; and it was plain to be seen that her visit to Marie had not brought her peace.

Billy knew Kate's letter, by heart, now, both in the original, and in its different versions, and she knew that, despite her struggles, she was being forced straight toward Kate's own verdict: that she, Billy, *was* the cause, in some way, of the deplorable change in Bertram's appearance, manner, and work. Before she would quite surrender to this heart-sickening belief, however, she determined to ask Bertram himself. Falteringly, but resolutely, therefore, one day, she questioned him.

"Bertram, once you hinted that the picture did not go right because you were troubled over something; and I've been wondering — was it about — me, in any way, that you were troubled?"

Billy had her answer before the man spoke. She had it in the quick terror that sprang to his eyes,

and the dull red that swept from his neck to his forehead. His reply, so far as words went did not count, for it evaded everything and told nothing. But Billy knew without words. She knew, too, what she must do. For the time being she took Bertram's evasive answer as he so evidently wished it to be taken; but that evening, after he had gone, she wrote him a little note and broke the engagement. So heartbroken was she — and so fearful was she that he should suspect this — that her note, when completed, was a cold little thing of few words, which carried no hint that its very coldness was but the heart-break in the disguise of pride.

This was like Billy in all ways. Billy, had she lived in the days of the Christian martyrs, would have been the first to walk with head erect into the Arena of Sacrifice. The arena now was just everyday living, the lions were her own devouring misery, and the cause was Bertram's best good.

From Bertram's own self she had it now — that she had been the cause of his being troubled; so she could doubt no longer. The only part that was uncertain was the reason why he had been troubled. Whether his bond to her had become irksome because of his love for another, or because of his love for no girl — except to paint, Billy did not know. But that it was irksome she did not

doubt now. Besides, as if she were going to slay his Art, stifle his Ambition, destroy his Inspiration, and be a nuisance generally just so that *she* might be happy! Indeed, no! Hence she broke the engagement.

This was the letter:

"DEAR BERTRAM: — You won't make the move, so I must. I knew, from the way you spoke to-day, that it *was* about me that you were troubled, even though you generously tried to make me think it was not. And so the picture did not go well.

"Now, dear, we have not been happy together lately. You have seen it; so have I. I fear our engagement was a mistake, so I'm going to send back your ring to-morrow, and I'm writing this letter to-night. Please don't try to see me just yet. You *know* what I am doing is best — all round.

"Always your friend,

"BILLY."

CHAPTER XXXI

FLIGHT

BILLY feared if she did not mail the letter at once she would not have the courage to mail it at all. So she slipped down-stairs very quietly and went herself to the post box a little way down the street; then she came back and sobbed herself to sleep — though not until after she had sobbed awake for long hours of wretchedness.

When she awoke in the morning, heavy-eyed and unrested, there came to her first the vague horror of some shadow hanging over her, then the sickening consciousness of what that shadow was. For one wild minute Billy felt that she must run to the telephone, summon Bertram, and beseech him to return unread the letter he would receive from her that day. Then there came to her the memory of Bertram's face as it had looked the night before when she had asked him if she were the cause of his being troubled. There came, too, the memory of Kate's scathing "Do you want to ruin his career?" Even the hated magazine article and Marie's tragic "I've *hindered* him!" added

their mite; and Billy knew that she should not go to the telephone, nor summon Bertram.

The one fatal mistake now would be to let Bertram see her own distress. If once he should suspect how she suffered in doing this thing, there would be a scene that Billy felt she had not the courage to face. She must, therefore, manage in some way not to see Bertram — not to let him see her until she felt more sure of her self-control no matter what he said. The easiest way to do this was, of course, to go away. But where? How? She must think. Meanwhile, for these first few hours, she would not tell any one, even Aunt Hannah, what had happened. There must *no one* speak to her of it, yet. That she could not endure. Aunt Hannah would, of course, shiver, groan "Oh, my grief and conscience!" and call for another shawl; and Billy just now felt as if she should scream if she heard Aunt Hannah say "Oh, my grief and conscience!" — over that. Billy went down to breakfast, therefore, with a determination to act exactly as usual, so that Aunt Hannah should not know — yet.

When people try to "act exactly as usual," they generally end in acting quite the opposite; and Billy was no exception to the rule. Hence her attempted cheerfulness became flippantness, and her laughter giggles that rang too frequently to be

quite sincere — though from Aunt Hannah it all elicited only an affectionate smile at "the dear child's high spirits."

A little later, when Aunt Hannah was glancing over the morning paper — now no longer barred from the door — she gave a sudden cry.

"Billy, just listen to this!" she exclaimed, reading from the paper in her hand. "'A new tenor in "The Girl of the Golden West." Appearance of Mr. M. J. Arkwright at the Boston Opera House to-night. Owing to the sudden illness of Dubassi, who was to have taken the part of Johnson to-night, an exceptional opportunity has come to a young tenor singer, one of the most promising pupils at the Conservatory school. Arkwright is said to have a fine voice, a particularly good stage presence, and a purity of tone and smoothness of execution that few of his age and experience can show. Only a short time ago he appeared as the duke at one of the popular-priced Saturday night performances of "Rigoletto"; and his extraordinary success on that occasion, coupled with his familiarity with, and fitness for the part of Johnson in "The Girl of the Golden West," led to his being chosen to take Dubassi's place to-night. His performance is awaited with the greatest of interest.' Now isn't that splendid for Mary Jane? I'm so glad!" beamed Aunt Hannah.

"Of course we're glad!" cried Billy. "And didn't it come just in time? This is the last week of opera, anyway, you know."

"But it says he sang before — on a Saturday night," declared Aunt Hannah, going back to the paper in her hand. "Now wouldn't you have thought we'd have heard of it, or read of it? And wouldn't you have thought he'd have told us?"

"Oh, well, maybe he didn't happen to see us so he could tell us," returned Billy with elaborate carelessness.

"I know it; but it's so funny he *hasn't* seen us," contended Aunt Hannah, frowning. "You know how much he used to be here."

Billy colored, and hurried into the fray.

"Oh, but he must have been so busy, with all this, you know. And of course we didn't see it in the paper — because we didn't have any paper at that time, probably. Oh, yes, that's my fault, I know," she laughed; "and I was silly, I'll own. But we'll make up for it now. We'll go, of course, I wish it had been on our regular season-ticket night, but I fancy we can get seats somewhere; and I'm going to ask Alice Greggory and her mother, too. I'll go down there this morning to tell them, and to get the tickets. I've got it all planned."

Billy had, indeed, "got it all planned." She

had been longing for something that would take her away from the house — and if possible away from herself. This would do the one easily, and might help on the other. She rose at once.

"I'll go right away," she said.

"But, my dear," frowned Aunt Hannah, anxiously, "I don't believe I can go to-night — though I'd love to, dearly."

"But why not?"

"I'm tired and half sick with a headache this morning. I didn't sleep, and I've taken cold somewhere," sighed the lady, pulling the top shawl a little higher about her throat.

"Why, you poor dear, what a shame!"

"Won't Bertram go?" asked Aunt Hannah.

Billy shook her head — but she did not meet Aunt Hannah's eyes.

"Oh, no. I sha'n't even ask him. He said last night he had a banquet on for to-night — one of his art clubs, I believe." Billy's voice was casualness itself.

"But you'll have the Greggorys — that is, Mrs. Greggory *can* go, can't she?" inquired Aunt Hannah.

"Oh, yes; I'm sure she can," nodded Billy. "You know she went to the operetta, and this is just the same — only bigger."

"Yes, yes, I know," murmured Aunt Hannah.

"Dear me! How can she get about so on those two wretched little sticks? She's a perfect marvel to me."

"She is to me, too," sighed Billy, as she hurried from the room.

Billy was, indeed, in a hurry. To herself she said she wanted to get away — away! And she got away as soon as she could.

She had her plans all made. She would go first to the Greggorys' and invite them to attend the opera with her that evening. Then she would get the tickets. Just what she would do with the rest of the day she did not know. She knew only that she would not go home until time to dress for dinner and the opera. She did not tell Aunt Hannah this, however, when she left the house. She planned to telephone it from somewhere down town, later. She told herself that she *could not* stay all day under the sharp eyes of Aunt Hannah — but she managed, nevertheless, to bid that lady a particularly blithe and bright-faced good-by.

Billy had not been long gone when the telephone bell rang. Aunt Hannah answered it.

"Why, Bertram, is that you?" she called, in answer to the words that came to her across the wire. "Why, I hardly knew your voice!"

"Didn't you? Well, is — is Billy there?"

"No, she isn't. She's gone down to see Alice Greggory."

"Oh!" So evident was the disappointment in the voice that Aunt Hannah added hastily:

"I'm so sorry! She hasn't been gone ten minutes. But — is there any message?"

"No, thank you. There's no — message." The voice hesitated, then went on a little constrainedly. "How — how is Billy this morning? She — she's all right, isn't she?"

Aunt Hannah laughed in obvious amusement.

"Bless your dear heart, yes, my boy! Has it been such a *long* time since last evening — when you saw her yourself? Yes, she's all right. In fact, I was thinking at the breakfast table how pretty she looked with her pink cheeks and her bright eyes. She seemed to be in such high spirits."

An inarticulate something that Aunt Hannah could not quite catch came across the line; then a somewhat hurried "All right. Thank you. Good-by."

The next time Aunt Hannah was called to the telephone, Billy spoke to her.

"Aunt Hannah, don't wait luncheon for me, please. I shall get it in town. And don't expect me till five o'clock. I have some shopping to do."

"All right, dear," replied Aunt Hannah. "Did you get the tickets?"

"Yes, and the Greggorys will go. Oh, and Aunt Hannah!"

"Yes, dear."

"Please tell John to bring Peggy around early enough to-night so we can go down and get the Greggorys. I told them we'd call for them."

"Very well, dear. I'll tell him."

"Thank you. How's the poor head?"

"Better, a little, I think."

"That's good. Won't you repent and go, too?"

"No — oh, no, indeed!"

"All right, then; good-by. I'm sorry!"

"So'm I. Good-by," sighed Aunt Hannah, as she hung up the receiver and turned away.

It was after five o'clock when Billy got home, and so hurried were the dressing and the dinner that Aunt Hannah forgot to mention Bertram's telephone call till just as Billy was ready to start for the Greggorys'.

"There! and I forgot," she confessed. "Bertram called you up just after you left this morning, my dear."

"Did he?" Billy's face was turned away, but Aunt Hannah did not notice that.

"Yes. Oh, he didn't want anything special," smiled the lady, "only — well, he did ask if you were all right this morning," she finished with quiet mischief.

"Did he?" murmured Billy again. This time there was a little sound after the words, which Aunt Hannah would have taken for a sob if she had not known that it must have been a laugh.

Then Billy was gone.

At eight o'clock the doorbell rang, and a minute later Rosa came up to say that Mr. Bertram Henshaw was down-stairs and wished to see Mrs. Stetson.

Mrs. Stetson went down at once.

"Why, my dear boy," she exclaimed, as she entered the room; "Billy said you had a banquet on for to-night!"

"Yes, I know; but — I didn't go." Bertram's face was pale and drawn. His voice did not sound natural.

"Why, Bertram, you look ill! *Are* you ill?"

The man made an impatient gesture.

"No, no, I'm not ill — I'm not ill at all. Rosa says — Billy's not here."

"No; she's gone to the opera with the Greggorys."

"The *opera!*" There was a grieved hurt in Bertram's voice that Aunt Hannah quite misunderstood. She hastened to give an apologetic explanation.

"Yes. She would have told you — she would have asked you to join them, I'm sure, but she

said you were going to a banquet. I'm *sure* she said so."

"Yes, I did tell her so — last night," nodded Bertram, dully.

Aunt Hannah frowned a little. Still more anxiously she endeavored to explain to this disappointed lover why his sweetheart was not at home to greet him.

"Well, then, of course, my boy, she'd never think of your coming here to-night; and when she found Mr. Arkwright was going to sing — "

"Arkwright!" There was no listlessness in Bertram's voice or manner now.

"Yes. Didn't you see it in the paper? Such a splendid chance for him! His picture was there, too."

"No. I didn't see it."

"Then you don't know about it, of course," smiled Aunt Hannah. "But he's to take the part of Johnson in 'The Girl of the Golden West.' Isn't that splendid? I'm so glad! And Billy was, too. She hurried right off this morning to get the tickets and to ask the Greggorys."

"Oh!" Bertram got to his feet a little abruptly, and held out his hand. "Well, then, I might as well say good-by then, I suppose," he suggested with a laugh that Aunt Hannah thought was a bit forced. Before she could remind him again, though, that

Billy was really not to blame for not being there to welcome him, he was gone. And Aunt Hannah could only go up-stairs and meditate on the unreasonableness of lovers in general, and of Bertram in particular.

Aunt Hannah had gone to bed, but she was still awake, when Billy came home, so she heard the automobile come to a stop before the door, and she called to Billy when the girl came up-stairs.

"Billy, dear, come in here. I'm awake! I want to hear about it. Was it good?"

Billy stopped in the doorway. The light from the hall struck her face. There was no brightness in her eyes now, no pink in her cheeks.

"Oh, yes, it was good — very good," she replied listlessly.

"Why, Billy, how queer you answer! What was the matter? Wasn't Mary Jane — all right?"

"Mary Jane? Oh! — oh, yes; he was very good, Aunt Hannah."

"'Very good,' indeed!" echoed the lady, indignantly. "He must have been! — when you speak as if you'd actually forgotten that he sang at all, anyway!"

Billy had forgotten — almost. Billy had found that, in spite of her getting away from the house, she had not got away from herself once, all day.

She tried now, however, to summon her acting powers of the morning.

"But it was splendid, really, Aunt Hannah," she cried, with some show of animation. "And they clapped and cheered and gave him any number of curtain calls. We were so proud of him! But you see, I *am* tired," she broke off wearily.

"You poor child, of course you are, and you look like a ghost! I won't keep you another minute. Run along to bed. Oh — Bertram didn't go to that banquet, after all. He came here," she added, as Billy turned to go.

"Bertram!" The girl wheeled sharply.

"Yes. He wanted you, of course. I found I didn't do, at all," chuckled Aunt Hannah. "Did you suppose I would?"

There was no answer. Billy had gone.

In the long night watches Billy fought it out with herself. (Billy had always fought things out with herself.) She must go away. She knew that. Already Bertram had telephoned, and called. He evidently meant to see her — and she could not see him. She dared not. If she did — Billy knew now how pitifully little it would take to make her actually *willing* to slay Bertram's Art, stifle his Ambition, destroy his Inspiration, and be a nuisance generally — if only she could have Bertram

while she was doing it all. Sternly then she asked herself if she had no pride; if she had forgotten that it was because of her that the Winthrop portrait had not been a success — because of her, either for the reason that he loved now Miss Winthrop, or else that he loved no girl — except to paint.

Very early in the morning a white-faced, red-eyed Billy appeared at Aunt Hannah's bedside.

"Billy!" exclaimed Aunt Hannah, plainly appalled.

Billy sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Aunt Hannah," she began in a monotonous voice as if she were reciting a lesson she had learned by heart, "please listen, and please try not to be too surprised. You were saying the other day that you would like to visit your old home town. Well, I think that's a very nice idea. If you don't mind we'll go to-day."

Aunt Hannah pulled herself half erect in bed.

"*To-day* — child?"

"Yes," nodded Billy, unsmilingly. "We shall have to go somewhere to-day, and I thought you would like that place best."

"But — Billy! — what does this mean?"

Billy sighed heavily.

"Yes, I understand. You'll have to know the rest, of course. I've broken my engagement. I

don't want to see Bertram. That's why I'm going away."

Aunt Hannah fell nervelessly back on the pillow. Her teeth fairly chattered.

"Oh, my grief and conscience — *Billy!* Won't you please pull up that blanket," she moaned. "Billy, what do you mean?"

Billy shook her head and got to her feet.

"I can't tell any more now, really, Aunt Hannah. Please don't ask me; and don't — talk. You *will* — go with me, won't you?" And Aunt Hannah, with her terrified eyes on Billy's piteously agitated face, nodded her head and choked:

"Why, of course I'll go — anywhere — with you, Billy; but — why did you do it, why did you do it?"

A little later, Billy, in her own room, wrote this note to Bertram:

"DEAR BERTRAM: — I'm going away to-day. That'll be best all around. You'll agree to that, I'm sure. Please don't try to see me, and please don't write. It wouldn't make either one of us any happier. You must know that.

"As ever your friend,

"BILLY."

Bertram, when he read it, grew only a shade more white, a degree more sick at heart. Then he

kissed the letter gently and put it away with the other.

To Bertram, the thing was very clear. Billy had come now to the conclusion that it would be wrong to give herself where she could not give her heart. And in this he agreed with her — bitter as it was for him. Certainly he did not want Billy, if Billy did not want him, he told himself. He would now, of course, accede to her request. He would not write to her — and make her suffer more. But to Bertram, at that moment, it seemed that the very sun in the heavens had gone out.

CHAPTER XXXII

PETE TO THE RESCUE

ONE by one the weeks passed and became a month. Then other weeks became other months. It was July when Billy, homesick and weary, came back to Hillside with Aunt Hannah.

Home looked wonderfully good to Billy, in spite of the fact that she had so dreaded to see it. Billy had made up her mind, however, that, come sometime she must. She could not, of course, stay always away. Perhaps, too, it would be just as easy at home as it was away. Certainly it could not be any harder. She was convinced of that. Besides, she did not want Bertram to think —

Billy had received only meagre news from Boston since she went away. Bertram had not written at all. William had written twice — hurt, grieved, puzzled, questioning letters that were very hard to answer. From Marie, too, had come letters of much the same sort. By far the cheeriest epistles had come from Alice Greggory. They contained, indeed, about the only comfort Billy had known for weeks, for they showed very plainly to Billy

that Arkwright's heart had been caught on the rebound; and that in Alice Greggory he was finding the sweetest sort of balm for his wounded feelings. From these letters Billy learned, too, that Judge Greggory's honor had been wholly vindicated; and, as Billy told Aunt Hannah, "anybody could put two and two together and make four, now."

It was eight o'clock on a rainy July evening that Billy and Aunt Hannah arrived at Hillside; and it was only a little past eight that Aunt Hannah was summoned to the telephone. When she came back to Billy she was crying and wringing her hands.

Billy sprang to her feet.

"Why, Aunt Hannah, what is it? What's the matter?" she demanded.

Aunt Hannah sank into a chair, still wringing her hands.

"Oh, Billy, Billy, how can I tell you, how can I tell you?" she moaned.

"You must tell me! Aunt Hannah, what is it?"

"Oh — oh — oh! Billy, I can't — I can't!"

"But you'll have to! What is it, Aunt Hannah?"

"It's — B-Bertram!"

"Bertram!" Billy's face grew ashen. "Quick, quick — what do you mean?"

For answer, Aunt Hannah covered her face with her hands and began to sob aloud. Billy, almost beside herself now with terror and anxiety, dropped on her knees and tried to pull away the shaking hands.

"Aunt Hannah, you must tell me! You must — you must!"

"I can't, Billy. It's Bertram. He's — *hurt!*" choked Aunt Hannah, hysterically.

"Hurt! How?"

"I don't know. Pete told me."

"Pete!"

"Yes. Rosa had told him we were coming, and he called me up. He said maybe I could do something. So he told me."

"Yes, yes! But told you what?"

"That he was hurt."

"How?"

"I couldn't hear all, but I think 'twas an accident — automobile. And, Billy, Billy — Pete says it's his arm — his right arm — and that maybe he can't ever p-paint again!"

"Oh-h!" Billy fell back as if the words had been a blow. "Not that, Aunt Hannah—not that!"

"That's what Pete said. I couldn't get all of it, but I got that. And, Billy, he's been out of his head — though he isn't now, Pete says — and — and — and he's been calling for you."

"For — *me?*" A swift change came to Billy's face.

"Yes. Over and over again he called for you — while he was crazy, you know. That's why Pete told me. He said he didn't rightly understand what the trouble was, but he didn't believe there was any trouble, *really*, between you two; anyway, that you wouldn't think there was, if you could hear him, and know how he wanted you, and — why, Billy!"

Billy was on her feet now. Her fingers were on the electric push-button that would summon Rosa. Her face was illumined. The next moment Rosa appeared.

"Tell John to bring Peggy to the door at once, please," directed her mistress.

"Billy!" gasped Aunt Hannah again, as the maid disappeared. Billy was tremblingly putting on the hat she had but just taken off. "Billy, what are you going to do?"

Billy turned in obvious surprise.

"Why, I'm going to Bertram, of course."

"To Bertram! But it's nearly half-past eight, child, and it rains, and everything!"

"But Bertram *wants* me!" exclaimed Billy. "As if I'd mind rain, or time, or anything else, *now!*"

"But — but — oh, my grief and conscience!"

groaned Aunt Hannah, beginning to wring her hands again.

Billy reached for her coat. Aunt Hannah stirred into sudden action.

"But, Billy, if you'd only wait till to-morrow," she quavered, putting out a feebly restraining hand.

"To-morrow!" The young voice rang with supreme scorn. "Do you think I'd wait till to-morrow — after all this? I say Bertram *wants* me." Billy picked up her gloves.

"But you broke it off, dear — you said you did; and to go down there to-night — like this — "

Billy lifted her head. Her eyes shone. Her whole face was a glory of love and pride.

"That was before. I didn't know. He *wants* me, Aunt Hannah. Did you hear? He *wants* me! And now I won't even — hinder him, if he can't — p-paint again!" Billy's voice broke. The glory left her face. Her eyes brimmed with tears, but her head was still bravely uplifted. "I'm going to Bertram!"

Blindly Aunt Hannah got to her feet. Still more blindly she reached for her bonnet and cloak on the chair near her.

"Oh, will you go, too?" asked Billy, abstractedly, hurrying to the window to look for the motor car.

"Will I go, too!" burst out Aunt Hannah's indignant voice. "Do you think I'd let you go alone, and at this time of night, on such a wild-goose chase as this?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," murmured Billy, still abstractedly, peering out into the rain.

"Don't know, indeed! Oh, my grief and conscience!" groaned Aunt Hannah, setting her bonnet hopelessly askew on top of her agitated head.

But Billy did not even answer now. Her face was pressed hard against the window-pane.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BERTRAM TAKES THE REINS

With stiffly pompous dignity Pete opened the door. The next moment he fell back in amazement before the impetuous rush of a starry-eyed, flushed-cheeked young woman who demanded:

"Where is he, Pete?"

"Miss Billy!" gasped the old man. Then he saw Aunt Hannah — Aunt Hannah with her bonnet askew, her neck-bow awry, one hand bare, and the other half covered with a glove wrong side out. Aunt Hannah's cheeks, too, were flushed, and her eyes starry, but with dismay and anger — the last because she did not like the way Pete had said Miss Billy's name. It was one matter for *her* to object to this thing Billy was doing — but quite another for Pete to do it.

"Of course it's she!" retorted Aunt Hannah, testily. "As if you yourself didn't bring her here with your crazy messages at this time of night!"

"Pete, where is he?" interposed Billy. "Tell Mr. Bertram I am here — or, wait! I'll go right in and surprise him."

"*Billy!*" This time it was Aunt Hannah who gasped her name.

Pete had recovered himself by now, but he did not even glance toward Aunt Hannah. His face was beaming, and his old eyes were shining.

"Miss Billy, Miss Billy, you're an angel straight from heaven, you are — you are! Oh, I'm so glad you came! It'll be all right now — all right! He's in the den, Miss Billy."

Billy turned eagerly, but before she could take so much as one step toward the door at the end of the hall, Aunt Hannah's indignant voice arrested her.

"Billy — stop! You're not an angel; you're a young woman — and a crazy one, at that! Whatever angels do, young women don't go unannounced and unchaperoned into young men's rooms! Pete, go tell your master that *we* are here, and ask if he will receive *us*."

Pete's lips twitched. The emphatic "we" and "us" were not lost on him. But his face was preternaturally grave when he spoke.

"Mr. Bertram is up and dressed, ma'am. He's in the den. I'll speak to him."

Pete, once again the punctilious butler, stalked to the door of Bertram's den and threw it wide open.

Opposite the door, on a low couch, lay Bertram,

his head bandaged, and his right arm in a sling. His face was turned toward the door, but his eyes were closed. He looked very white, and his features were pitifully drawn with suffering.

"Mr. Bertram," began Pete — but he got no further. A flying figure brushed by him and fell on its knees by the couch, with a low cry.

Bertram's eyes flew open. Across his face swept such a radiant look of unearthly joy that Pete sobbed audibly and fled to the kitchen. Dong Ling found him there a minute later polishing a silver teaspoon with a fringed napkin that had been spread over Bertram's tray. In the hall above Aunt Hannah was crying into William's gray linen duster that hung on the hall-rack — Aunt Hannah's handkerchief was on the floor back at Hillside.

In the den neither Billy nor Bertram knew or cared what had become of Aunt Hannah and Pete. There were just two people in their world — two people, and unutterable, incredible, overwhelming rapture and peace. Then, very gradually it dawned over them that there was, after all, something strange and unexplained in it all.

"But, dearest, what does it mean — you here, like this?" asked Bertram then. As if to make sure that she was "here, like this," he drew her even closer — Bertram was so thankful that he did have one arm that was usable.

Billy, on her knees by the couch, snuggled into the curve of the one arm with a contented little sigh.

"Well, you see, just as soon as I found out to-night that you wanted me, I came," she said.

"You darling! That was — " Bertram stopped suddenly. A puzzled frown showed below the fantastic bandage about his head. "'As soon as,'" he quoted then scornfully. "Were you ever by any possible chance thinking I *didn't* want you?"

Billy's eyes widened a little.

"Why, Bertram, dear, don't you see? When you were so troubled that the picture didn't go well, and I found out it was about me you were troubled — I — "

"Well?" Bertram's voice was a little strained.

"Why, of — of course," stammered Billy, "I couldn't help thinking that maybe you had found out you *didn't* want me."

"*Didn't want you!*" groaned Bertram, his tense muscles relaxing. "May I ask why?"

Billy blushed.

"I wasn't quite sure why," she faltered; "only, of course, I thought of — of Miss Winthrop, you know, or that maybe it was because you didn't care for *any* girl, only to paint — oh, oh, Bertram! Pete told us," she broke off wildly, beginning to sob.

"Pete told you that I didn't care for any girl, only to paint?" demanded Bertram, angry and mystified.

"No, no," sobbed Billy, "not that. It was all the others that told me that! Pete told Aunt Hannah about the accident, you know, and he said — he said — Oh, Bertram, I *can't* say it! But that's one of the things that made me know I *could* come now, you see, because I — I wouldn't hinder you, nor slay your Art, nor any other of those dreadful things if — if you couldn't ever — p-paint again," finished Billy in an uncontrollable burst of grief.

"There, there, dear," comforted Bertram, patting the bronze-gold head on his breast. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about — except the last; but I know there *can't* be anything that ought to make you cry like that. As for my not painting again — you didn't understand Pete, dearie. That was what they were afraid of at first — that I'd lose my arm; but that danger is all past now. I'm loads better. Of course I'm going to paint again — and better than ever before — *now!*"

Billy lifted her head. A look that was almost terror came to her eyes. She pulled herself half away from Bertram's encircling arm.

"Why, Billy," cried the man, in pained sur-

prise. "You don't mean to say you're *sorry* I'm going to paint again!"

"No, no! Oh, no, Bertram — never that!" she faltered, still regarding him with fearful eyes. "It's only — for *me*, you know. I *can't* go back now, and not have you — after this! — even if I do hinder you, and —"

"*Hinder me!* What are you talking about, Billy?"

Billy drew a quivering sigh.

"Well, to begin with, Kate said —"

"Good heavens! Is Kate in *this*, too?" Bertram's voice was savage now.

"Well, she wrote a letter."

"I'll warrant she did! Great Scott, Billy! Don't you know Kate by this time?"

"Y-yes, I said so, too. But, Bertram, what she wrote was true. I found it everywhere, afterwards — in magazines and papers, and even in Marie."

"Humph! Well, dearie, I don't know yet what you found, but I do know you wouldn't have found it at all if it hadn't been for Kate — and I wish I had her here this minute!"

Billy giggled hysterically.

"I don't — not *right* here," she cooed, nestling comfortably against her lover's arm. "But you see, dear, she never *has* approved of the marriage."

"Well, who's doing the marrying — she, or I?"

"That's what I said, too — only in another way," sighed Billy. "But she called us flyaway flutterbudgets, and she said I'd ruin your career, if I did marry you."

"Well, I can tell you right now, Billy, you will ruin it if you don't!" declared Bertram. "That's what ailed me all the time I was painting that miserable portrait. I was so worried — for fear I'd lose you."

"Lose me! Why, Bertram Henshaw, what do you mean?"

A shamed red crept to the man's forehead.

"Well, I suppose I might as well own up now as any time. I was scared blue, Billy, with jealousy of — Arkwright."

Billy laughed gayly — but she shifted her position and did not meet her lover's eyes.

"Arkwright? Nonsense!" she cried. "Why, he's going to marry Alice Greggory. I know he is! I can see it as plain as day in her letters. He's there a lot."

"And you never did think for a minute, Billy, that you cared for him?" Bertram's gaze searched Billy's face a little fearfully. He had not been slow to mark that swift lowering of her eyelids. But Billy looked him now straight in the face — it was a level, frank gaze of absolute truth.

"Never, dear," she said firmly. (Billy was so glad Bertram had turned the question on *her* love instead of Arkwright's!) "There has never really been any one but you."

"Thank God for that," breathed Bertram, as he drew the bright head nearer and held it close.

After a minute Billy stirred and sighed happily.

"Aren't lovers the beat'em for imagining things?" she murmured.

"They certainly are."

"You see — I wasn't in love with Mr. Arkwright."

"I see — I hope."

"And — and you didn't care *specially* for — for Miss Winthrop?"

"Eh? Well, no!" exploded Bertram. "Do you mean to say you really — "

Billy put a soft finger on his lips.

"Er — 'people who live in *glass houses*,' you know," she reminded him, with roguish eyes.

Bertram kissed the finger and subsided.

"Humph!" he commented.

There was a long silence; then, a little breathlessly, Billy asked:

"And you don't — after all, love me — just to paint?"

"Well, what is that? Is that Kate, too?" demanded Bertram, grimly.

Billy laughed.

"No — oh, she said it, all right, but, you see, *everybody* said that to me, Bertram; and that's what made me so — so worried sometimes when you talked about the tilt of my chin, and all that."

"Well, by Jove!" breathed Bertram.

There was another silence. Then, suddenly, Bertram stirred.

"Billy, I'm going to marry you to-morrow," he announced decisively.

Billy lifted her head and sat back in palpitating dismay.

"Bertram! What an absurd idea!"

"Well, I am. I don't *know* as I can trust you out of my sight till *then!* You'll read something, or hear something, or get a letter from Kate after breakfast to-morrow morning, that will set you 'saving me' again; and I don't want to be saved — that way. I'm going to marry you to-morrow. I'll get — " He stopped short, with a sudden frown. "Confound that law! I forgot. Great Scott, Billy, I'll have to trust you five days, after all! There's a new law about the license. We've *got* to wait five days — and maybe more, counting in the notice, and all."

Billy laughed softly.

"Five days, indeed, sir! I wonder if you think I can get ready to be married in five days."

"Don't want you to get ready," retorted Bertram, promptly. "I saw Marie get ready, and I had all I wanted of it. If you really must have all those miles of tablecloths and napkins and doilies and lace ruffling, we'll do it afterwards, — not before."

"But — "

"Besides, I *need* you to take care of me," cut in Bertram, craftily.

"Bertram, do you — really?"

The tender glow on Billy's face told its own story, and Bertram's eager eyes were not slow to read it.

"Sweetheart, see here, dear," he cried softly, tightening his good left arm. And forthwith he began to tell her how much he did, indeed, need her.

"Billy, my dear!" It was Aunt Hannah's plaintive voice at the doorway, a little later. "We must go home; and William is here, too, and wants to see you."

Billy rose at once as Aunt Hannah entered the room.

"Yes, Aunt Hannah, I'll come; besides — " she glanced at Bertram mischievously — "I shall need all the time I've got to prepare for — my wedding."

"Your wedding! You mean it'll be before — October?" Aunt Hannah glanced from one to the other uncertainly. Something in their smiling faces sent a quick suspicion to her eyes.

"Yes," nodded Billy, demurely. "It's next Tuesday, you see."

"Next Tuesday! But that's only a week away," gasped Aunt Hannah.

"Yes, a week."

"But, child, your trousseau — the wedding — the — the — a week!" Aunt Hannah could not articulate further.

"Yes, I know; that is a good while," cut in Bertram, airily. "We wanted it to-morrow, but we had to wait, on account of the new license law. Otherwise it wouldn't have been so long, and — "

But Aunt Hannah was gone. With a low-breathed "Long! Oh, my grief and conscience — *William!*" she had fled through the hall door.

"Well, it *is* long," maintained Bertram, with tender eyes, as he reached out his hand to say good-night.

THE END.

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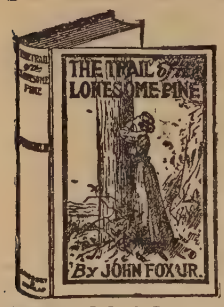

Illustrated by F. C. Yohn.

The "lonesome pine" from which the story takes its name was a tall tree that stood in solitary splendor on a mountain top. The fame of the pine lured a young engineer through Kentucky to catch the trail, and when he finally climbed to its shelter he found not only the pine but the *foot-prints of a girl.* And the girl proved to be lovely, piquant, and the trail of these girlish foot-prints led the young engineer a madder chase than "the trail of the lonesome pine."

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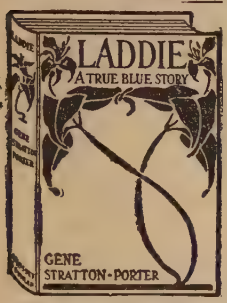

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